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**Elitelore at the Opera:**  
**The Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires**

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In his recent film *Fitzcarraldo*, Hans Werner Herzog presents a vivid theme: the protagonist's vision of constructing an opera house in a remote frontier of South America.<sup>1</sup> The terrible hardships endured in order to realize this dream form the substance of *Fitzcarraldo's* odyssey. The clear impression left by the film is that the opera theater and the performances it will give represent the view of Europeans (and their Latin American followers) about opera as a definitive symbol of a civilized society. Indeed, this identification of opera with the advancement of Western ideas has been a significant concept in the cultural history of Latin America. Because of the belief in the power of opera, magnificent buildings have been erected in the great cities, and even the smaller towns, of Latin America; performers have crossed thousands of miles of land and water; audiences have attended productions with an almost religious fervor; and journals have reported and debated what the public has seen and heard.

Argentina has evidenced a deeper attachment to opera than any other Latin American country. Therefore, I propose to examine the

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<sup>1</sup>. Review of *Fitzcarraldo*, *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1982, Part VI, p.1.

Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires. I will use the concept of "elitelore" in order to analyze the problem of the relationship between this opera theater and Argentine society.

The study of "lore" in general has moved beyond traditional folklore in recent years.<sup>2</sup> This "somewhat loosely delineated field" has been given particular significance for Latin Americanists by James W. Wilkie and others who have published in the *Journal of Latin American Lore*. They have declared a need for the establishment of "elitelore."<sup>3</sup> In the widest context, "lore is defined as non-institutionalized knowledge in elitelore (found in conceptual and perceptual information and views manipulated by unique individuals to justify leadership...)." <sup>4</sup> The lore established by elites in Latin America has been particularly notable and identifiable, a mirror image of the lore that forms so much a part of folk cultures in this region. Elitelore has been divided into several subfields. It might be appropriate in the material I am examining here to speak of "institutionlore," the lore surrounding significant institutions in Latin America, such as the military or the hacienda, or established social centers, such, as an opera theater or an exclusive club. In addition, on a level with such concepts as cinemalore, it is possible to speak of "operalore."

Opera itself has been the subject of an extensive lore since its creation in northern Italy around 1600.<sup>5</sup> Defined in terms of *dramma per musica* (drama through music), it combines most of the major artistic conceptions of modern Western culture, including music, theatrical text, dance, scenic design and costume, as well as complex interpretation by singers and orchestra. Opera in Europe, therefore, has remained a significant part of the cultural and social movements characteristic of the past three centuries. It reached its highest development in the nineteenth century, as a result of its appeal to the dominant social class, the bourgeoisie. Composers came from this class and ruled opera with their values and worldviews, thus creating a body of lore which influenced and manipu-

<sup>2</sup> Munro S. Edmonson, *Lon: An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See James W. Wilkie, *Elitelore*, (Los Angeles: Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1973), and James W. Wilkie and Edna Monzón de Wilkie, eds., *Elitelore as a New Field of Inquiry: Influence of the Novel, Film and Oral History on National Policy Decisions in Latin America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Management, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> James W. Wilkie, Edna Monzón de Wilkie, and Marla Herrera-Sobek, "Elitelore and Folklore: Theory and a Test Case in *One Hundred years of Solitude*," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 4:2(1978), 185.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace: Brockway and Herbert Weinstock, *The World of Opera: The Story of Its Development and Lore of its Performance* (New York: The Modern Library, 1966), pp.3-12.

lated the large numbers of people who attended or knew about opera presentations.<sup>6</sup> The outward signs of the importance of opera were the magnificent theaters which became the centers of cultural and in part social life in European capitals.

The history of opera in Argentina began in the immediate postindependence period. The avowed policy of Bernardino Rivadavia, as the Minister of Government in the province of Buenos Aires (1820-1823), and then as President of the nation (1826-1827), was to encourage the introduction of European artistic influence. He had spent six years in London, Paris, and Madrid, where he witnessed the explosion of opera's popularity coinciding with the early career of the composer Gioacchino Rossini. Thus, the first complete opera given in Argentina (by a visiting Italian group) was the *Barber of Seville*: the possibilities inherent in opera were noted at once when a newspaper review commented that "hopefully our comic theater might benefit also from these scenes in order to learn to put on comedy without resorting to the silliness and grossness of the sainetes [popular farces]."<sup>7</sup> Opera then represented a means to uplift common diversions. The efforts of Mariano Pablo Rosquellas, a Spaniard resident in Buenos Aires from 1823 to 1833, proved decisive for the firm establishment of opera. He introduced many of Rossini's works, as well as Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.<sup>8</sup>

Once opera had become a part of the musical life in Buenos Aires, it manifested a particular appeal for the urban elite of bankers, shippers, and merchants, who were outward-looking in their orientation. They encouraged the transformation of Argentina from a cattle-ranching frontier to a more modern society. These *porteños* (residents of the port, Buenos Aires) made opera a symbol of their own early identification of nationalism with European bourgeois culture. The taste for music drama grew rapidly and soon Italian touring companies, which played the latest continental favorites, found themselves in great demand. But the audience made up of porteño elite was thwarted by the owners of great tracts of land, the *estancieros*, who came to control most of the country during the despotic rule of Juan Manuel de Rosas from 1835 to 1852. At least until 1848, when his power was declining, Rosas brought a halt to opera productions in Argentina with a distinctly anti-foreign nationalism. During the Rosas period many intellectuals from Buenos Aires were forced into exile; perhaps the most famous of them was Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who conceived a renowned dichotomy

<sup>6</sup> The best example of this assertion can be seen in the cast of Richard Wagner, whose lore has been enshrined as "Wagnerism."

<sup>7</sup> *El Argos de Buenos-Ayres*, no. 195. October 12. 1825. p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> See Vicente Gesualdo, *Pablo Rosquellas y los orígenes de la ópera en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Artes en América. 1962).

concerning his homeland: the struggle between native "barbarism" and European "civilization" for control of Argentina. A significant aspect of this concept was that Sarmiento also penned opera criticism during his stay in Santiago de Chile. He strongly identified opera with civilization and argued that the works of its great composers, Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, educated people in correct moral behavior.<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence of the increasing wealth and stability of Argentina (which had the effect of reconciling the interests of the estanciero and porteno elites), the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the irreversible establishment of opera as a major form of entertainment in Buenos Aires. The construction of some half-dozen theaters attested to the expanding popularity of opera. The most notable building was the Teatro de la Victoria, which was completed in 1838, but only became an operatic center in the post-Rosas period. The wealthy families, who now made up a political oligarchy dedicated to the liberal principles of free trade and Europeanization, adopted the Victoria as their preferred meeting place, as it presented the best French and Italian singers in the most fashionable operas from Paris or Milan.<sup>11</sup> This contact with visitors from abroad made the elite aware that they did not possess a first-class theater and that they would have to construct one posthaste as a symbol of their new status.

The first theater to carry the name of America's discoverer was built on Buenos Aires's main square, the Plaza 25 de Mayo (as it was then called, before becoming simply Plaza de Mayo), and began its activities on the Argentine national holiday, May 25, in 1857. During the following thirty years this Teatro Colón established a solid reputation as the "official" opera house of Buenos Aires (although a number of less opulent theaters served the mass audience composed of European immigrants). As Argentina's first building constructed of iron, the original Colón seemed large and luxurious to porteños, a fit home for the new *gente de pesos* (people with money). As the boxes were open, the affluent could view one another from head to foot, dressed in their sometimes inelegant copies of continental finery.<sup>12</sup> This "primitive" Colón, as commentators are fond of calling it,<sup>13</sup> was where families acquired social

<sup>9</sup> Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Life in the Argentina Republic in the Days of the Tyrants or Civilization and Barbarism* (New York: Collier Books, 1961).

<sup>10</sup> Pola Suarez Urtubey, *La música en el ideario de Sarmiento* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Polifonia, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> Mario Garcia Acevedo, *La musica argentina durante el periodo de la organización nacional* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1961), pp. 107-108.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110, and Mariano G. Busch, *Historia de la opera en Buenos Aires: origen del canto y la música* (Buenos Aires: El Comercio, 1905), pp. 215-216.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Nestor Echevarria, *El arte lírico en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Imprima Editores, 1979).

status by being seen, not only at the opera, but also at the elaborate balls and receptions held there.<sup>14</sup>

Lucy Dowling, an American journalist who visited Buenos Aires in 1882, has left a vivid description of the upper-class women attending the opera.<sup>15</sup> She considered the interior of the Colón to be dingy and poorly decorated in comparison with theaters she had attended in Europe and the United States, while the female patrons, on the other hand, offered a lesson in conspicuous consumption. Dowling seemed much taken with the variety of physical types—northern and southern European—which she observed through her glasses, a possible indication of the influx of immigrants who identified the opera with their overseas origins. A companion article complained bitterly that all those attending the Colón knew one another intimately and spent all of their time chattering, in contrast to audiences in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

It was during the heyday of the first Teatro Colón that an interesting elite view of the relationship of sophisticated opera in Buenos Aires to rustic rural Argentina was expressed. Estanislao del Campo was a member of Buenos Aires's wealthy establishment and a well-known literary figure. Like most members of his class during the nineteenth century, he maintained a strong connection with the countryside. It seems that the language of the city and the rural areas did not differ markedly, so that "the cultured life understood thoroughly the pastoral life."<sup>17</sup>

When del Campo attended the opening night of the Colón in 1857 for a performance of Verdi's *La Traviata*, he was struck by the identification of the audience with the plight of the tragic heroine and, consequently, impressed with the power of opera to move people. At the time he composed some verses recounting the occasion. Soon thereafter, in honor of Italian soprano Emmy La Grua, he published a poem entitled "Carta de Anastasio el Pollo sobre el beneficio de la señora La Grua." This narrative, which placed an archetypal gaucho, called Anastasio el Pollo, at the opera, dissatisfied del Campo. He apparently could not find a way to make the stage action connect with Argentina's rural folkways. As a result, he dropped the theme for some years. Then the

<sup>14</sup> James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb. 1870-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 219-220, remarks on the revels held at night in the Colón.

<sup>15</sup> Lucy Dowling, "El Teatro de Colón: impresiones de una viajera," *Nueva Revista de Buenos Aires* 2:5 (August 1882), 80-95.

<sup>16</sup> R. Nesto, "La opera italiana en Buenos Aires," *Nueva Revista de Buenos Aires*, 2 (August 1882), 96-112.

<sup>17</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, *Análisis de "Fausto"* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1968), p. 16; this study synthesizes recent research on *Fausto* and its origins.

appearance in a newspaper of the libretto for Charles Gounoud's *Faust* such publication indicated the anticipation of opera-goers in Buenos Aires-inspired del Campo to return to his idea of a rustic at the Colón. He completed much of his poem before seeing *Faust*, based on Goethe's classic, and then made changes after the premiere public performance of the opera on August 24, 1866, which was a spectacular success in Buenos Aires.

On September 30, 1866, del Campo's *Fausto* appeared in a literary Journal, *Correo del Domingo*, with the subtitle "Impresiones del gaucho Anastasio del Pollo en la presentación de esta ópera."<sup>18</sup> The story of a gaucho who wanders into a performance of Gounoud's *Faust* at the Teatro Colón was turned into an endearing comedy by making Anastasio believe that what he has seen on stage actually happened and by having him relate the events in gaucho dialect to his friend. Del Campo's work reflects the enduring theme of antagonism between the European and the rural Argentine. Most significant is his desire to comment on opera in Buenos Aires, a spectacle that is bound to be misunderstood by the *paisanos* (persons from the rural provinces), whose folklore about the devil is more literal than European literary lore as represented by Goethe's symbolic Mephistopheles. Nevertheless, a contemporary journal pointed out that Argentines who wore "frockcoats and top hats" were equally unable to grasp the intellectual profundities of the opera *Faust*.<sup>19</sup>

The publication of *Fausto* marks the emergence of an elitelore applicable to the Teatro Colón, in this case the original theater. The poem was composed by a member of Argentina's literati about the gaucho whom he knew well and respected. Yet the lesson of his work was in the tradition of Sarmiento: that the rude creole was incapable of understanding this highest expression of European civilization. Del Campo thus influenced Argentina's self-image about the folk and their relationship to national culture. Although the gaucho disappeared from the pampas as cattle raising was modernized, as a literary classic *Fausto* continued to express the view that the Colón was the preeminent theater of Argentina where high and low culture once met, and then parted.

A powerful elite of wealthy landowners, whose great prosperity was engendered by wheat and meat exports, formed the famous Argentine Generation of 1880. The world view of this group emphasized the role of opera as a strong force for consciously and unconsciously Europeanizing the masses of Argentina. They were supported by the large numbers of immigrants from Italy, for whom opera was a source, of national greatness.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Pedro Goyena, "Poesía de Estanislao del Campo," *Revista Argentina* 7:39 (April 16, 1870), 219.

## ELITELORE AT THE OPERA

The physical and social transformation of Buenos Aires followed the legal federalization of the city in 1880. From the *gran aldea* (big village) of the earlier part of the century, it became an international metropolis, rebuilt to meet the needs of those controlling large amounts of capital, now living in their urban mansions, or *palacios*. This oligarchy demanded a great new opera house. The original Teatro Colón had been constructed on the north side of the Plaza 25 de Mayo, at that time the center of Buenos Aires's social, commercial, and political life. By the late nineteenth century retail business had moved north along the elegant avenue, Florida, and into the wealthy neighborhoods, while places of entertainment were established to the east on the boulevards Lavalle and Corrientes. Government ministries took over the entire Plaza de Mayo area.<sup>20</sup>

The municipal authorities decided to raze the old Colón (the site would be used as the headquarters of the Banco de la Nación) and to relocate the opera house to the theater district on the Plaza Lavalle. The demolition of the original Colón was quickly accomplished in 1888, but the construction of the new auditorium would take twenty painful years.

Meanwhile, opera continued to flourish at a number of other locales, of which the most important was the Teatro de la Opera on the Avenida Corrientes. This building was remodeled in a richly ornamental style in 1889 and became a center for presenting the heady mixture of late nineteenth-century operas and singers then dazzling Europe.

Buenos Aires's municipal leaders decided to build an opera theater to the highest international standards. These edifices for lyric drama had become the cathedrals of the nineteenth-century city. L'Opera of Paris, constructed between 1861 and 1875, was the ne plus ultra of this form of architecture, an entirely new and individualistic conception of its designer, Charles Garnier. Its function, summed up by one commentator, explains why opera houses of the period were centers of elitelore:

"To present great shows to splendidly dressed audiences, to allow the less privileged class to watch the arrival and departure of the rich, to admire the facade, the windows blazing with light, the walls behind which mysterious events happened ... and at the same time to present a glamorous image of France and its emperor, of Paris, its capital city."<sup>21</sup>

The municipal government of Buenos Aires was the authority which undertook the Colón project. Francisco Tamburini, a well-known archi-

<sup>20</sup> See recent studies on the history of Buenos Aires: Charles S. Sargent, *The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1870-1930* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1974), and scobie. *Buenos Aires*.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Mayer, "L'Opera, Paris," in Anthony Gishford, ed., *Grand Opera: The Story of the World's Leading Opera Houses and Personalities* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 61.

tect, submitted plans, and a date was selected for the laying of 11 cornerstone (to be accompanied by a specially composed hymn).<sup>22</sup> The envisaged completion date was appropriately October 12, 1892, the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landing in the New World. Famous families subscribed to boxes at 60,000 pesos each.<sup>23</sup> Then a host of problems occurred as the shell of the structure appeared. The original architect died and the second was murdered; the contractor went bankrupt and the municipality had to take direct control of the project; the Argentine taste in architecture shifted from Italian to French models and the design had to be modified; and the oligarchy, the motivating force for the auditorium, could not give its unqualified support during the financial crisis of the 1890s. The building stood unfinished, a reminder of the elite's aspirations for Argentina. Their reputation was in jeopardy because of the deep commitment they had made to complete this opera theater.

The new Colón eventually opened its doors in 1908 during the economic boom years of the first decade of the twentieth century. To this day it remains a superior environment in which to experience opera. The shape and design of the edifice emulate the classical ideal of the opera theater as it had been developing in Europe. The style can be termed Italian Renaissance, yet much of the detail, both exterior and interior, reflects turn-of-the-century French influence. The impression given by the Colón is one of strength and monumentality, with attractive proportions and great dignity. Indeed, it is the last of the famous nineteenth-century type of opera houses.

With about 2,500 permanent seats (and perhaps as many as 4,000 spectators can be accommodated) this auditorium was one of the largest in the world at the time of its opening.<sup>24</sup> Seating was designed in the venerated horseshoe pattern, which gave the Colón its outstanding acoustics. Above the orchestra section, the oligarchy of Argentina displayed itself in three rows of just over one hundred boxes. The centrally located presidential box functioned as the focal point, particularly on special occasions. The boxes were left open, with only low divisions between them, because, as the architect Meano explained, "in this way spectators can see and be seen, and thus placed in evidence is the magnificent crown of beautiful and elegant women, first adornment and attrac-

<sup>22</sup> Details of the building process in Pola Suarez Urtubey, "La construcción del Teatro Colón" in Robert Caamaño, ed., *La historia del Teatro Colon, 1908-1968*, vol. I (Buenos Aires: Editorial Cinetea, 1969), pp. 129-163.

<sup>23</sup> One gold peso was more or less equivalent to one gold dollar.

<sup>24</sup> See the comparative table of opera house measurements in Ernesto de la Guardia and Robert Herrera, *El arte lirico en el Teatro Colon (con motivo de sus bodas de plata 1908-1933)* (Buenos Aires: Zea y Tejero, 1933).

tion of all theater halls.<sup>25</sup> Soaring further toward the enormous chandelier were the balconies, on up to the paraíso (paradise, the gallery) with its hard benches and standing room. Social status was indicated by the point of entrance: a main portal on the Calle Libertad led to an elegant hall and then to the orchestra and boxes; the way to the balconies was a much smaller door on the Calle Arturo Toscanini, and a long fight of stairs from the Calle Tucuman went to the upper reaches. For lavish receptions the magnificent Salón Dorado was made a part of the Colón and provided an appropriate setting for box-holders to meet.

The early history of the modern Colón was dominated by two events: the opening night and the centennial festivities: The inauguration proved an anticlimax and a sign of Argentina's operatic subservience, an affront to growing nationalism. The theater was referred to as "a branch of La Scala," the famous Italian opera house in Milan.<sup>26</sup> The presentation of lyric drama in Buenos Aires depended upon the arrival of fully staffed and equipped companies from Europe. The new Colón had no intention of challenging this practice and the only issue was the selection of the best concessionaire, who would choose the singers and repertoire. When the ship from Italy sailed into the Plata estuary (with only the bravest performers willing to confront opening night superstitions), the newspapers reported that Verdi's *Otello* would be the curtain raiser; this was soon changed to Thomas's *Hamlet*, and finally another Verdi work, *Aida*, was actually performed. A critic could only conclude that "so much has been said about the inauguration of the new Colón theater it becomes almost unnecessary to insist on what was inaugurated today."<sup>27</sup> Yet the cultural significance for Argentines seemed overwhelming: crowds milled around throughout the day, the president of the nation arrived through ranks of uniformed and mounted grenadiers, and the national anthem was sung twice before the performance.

An even more fervent patriotic outpouring occurred on May 25, 1910, the celebration of one hundred years since creoles deposed the Spanish viceroy and began the process of independence. The president of Argentina, Jose Figueroa Alcorta, was accompanied to the Colón (for Verdi's *Rigoletto* with the famous baritone Titta Ruffo) by the infanta of Spain, Isabella de Borbón, and the president of Chile. The phrase "rich as an Argentine," common in Europe at that time, must have had its most vivid substantiation in the splendor of dress and jewels that night. A comparison with a royal evening at London's Covent Garden seemed

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Armando Manlio Rapallo. "Descripción del Teatro Colón." in Caamaño, ed., *La historia del Teatro Colón*, vol. I, p. 177.

<sup>26</sup> Caamaño, ed., *La historia del Teatro Colón*, vol. 2, p. 177.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Suarez Urtubey, "La construcción del Teatro Colón," in Caamaño, ed., *La historia del Teatro Colón*, vol. 1, p. 161.

appropriate.<sup>28</sup> For the elite only an opera in such a magnificent setting as the Colón could symbolize a century of progress. However, opposition to the oligarchy could also be most forcefully demonstrated at this theater. On the evening of June 26, 1910, the second act of *Manon* was interrupted by a powerful bomb blast, which injured seven persons.<sup>29</sup> The conductor calmed the audience with the national anthem.

The history of the Colón in the seventy-five years which followed has confirmed its role as one of the most significant repositories of elitelore in Argentina. A collective national myth was born identifying this theater as a glorification of Argentina, as a musical center comparable with the best in Europe, and as a symbol of the nation's fortune. Only the elite appeared capable of making the Colón function on a high level of achievement, and it was most willing to perpetuate the association of the theater's greatness—a symbol of national superiority—with its leadership.

Argentina's *belle époque*, which was scarcely disturbed by the 1914-1918 war, lasted through the first two decades of the twentieth century. After the Colón opened in 1908, and particularly between 1910 and 1920, some brilliant seasons of music drama took place. Among them was that of 1912, when Arturo Toscanini, by then a world-renowned conductor, interpreted a Wagnerian program.<sup>30</sup> The oligarchy attended the opera with ever-increasing devotion. Julia Valentina Bunge, a member of one of Argentina's wealthiest and most sophisticated families, indicated in her memoirs the part that opera played in her active social life. "Opera season. What joy! ... Last year I went fifty-four times to the opera, that is to all the functions there were."<sup>31</sup> She showed a solid knowledge of music and a discriminating taste, while noting that some young ladies of her social class would not attend operas because of the questionable moral situations depicted in many of them. Señorita Bunge sat in the presidential box at the centennial celebration in 1910, as her father was then head of the Supreme Court. She also left a vivid picture of the charity costume balls held at the opera house: attendance was clearly a sign of upper-class status.

The means by which the elite secured its domination of the theater came from *abonos* (subscription series): famous families purchased a box or a group of orchestra seats on a certain night for the entire season.

<sup>28</sup> Alfredo Diu de Molina. *José Figueroa Alcorta: de la oligarquía a la democracia, 1898 - 1928* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra. n.d.), p. 335.

<sup>29</sup> *The Times* (London), June: 28, 1910. p.5.

<sup>30</sup> Summaries of each season's presentations are found in *El Teatro Colón: cincuenta años de gloria 1908-1958* (Buenos Aires: J. Hector Matera. 1958).

<sup>31</sup> Julia Valentina Bunge. *Vida: época maravillosa, 1903-1911* (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores. 1965). p. 186.

This practice put the best seats firmly in their hands year after year and made it very difficult for outsiders to buy their way in. At the outset there were two series, on Wednesday and on Friday evenings.<sup>32</sup> These were the preferred days for porteño high society, and so became known as the two *gran abono* evenings, because they included the best operas and served the elite. The cost of an *abono* seat in the orchestra ran to about 20 pesos for each performance, or more than twice the weekly salary of an unskilled worker.<sup>33</sup> Of course, the price of boxes was much greater, but they were for all practical purposes the possession of the historic names, Anchorena, Paz, and Peña, among others, who contracted to keep them for all the musical events and bestowed the places for repeat performances upon relatives and friends. Indeed, attendance at *gran abono* nights was the major social gathering of the oligarchy in Buenos Aires on a regular basis during the winter season.

Two more subscription series were added, on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons, with more appeal for the middle class. For the opera-going public of workers and students, a large group among the Italian immigrants, the galleries offered inexpensive seats. In addition, "extraordinary" functions took place from time to time in order to present popular operas at lower prices; these were, of course, never attended by the upper class.

Soon after the elite took over the Colón in the early years, it found no echo of its dominance from the presidential box. When the theater opened its doors in 1908, politics was still the preserve of the conservatives, the wealthy coterie that had maintained an unbreakable hold on national and provincial governments. They believed in economic liberalism, and a policy of free trade and unrestricted entry into Argentina by European investors, but also in the political repression of all rival groups. Nevertheless, by the 1890s a formidable opposition had arisen in the form of the Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civic Union), representing the middle class.<sup>34</sup> Electoral fraud meant that these "Radicals" had no opportunity to gain public office, until a conservative president. Roque Saenz Peña, apparently recognizing the need to prevent violence, instituted the secret ballot. This act ensured victory at the polls for the Radicals, and the party leader, Hipólito Yrigoyen, became president of Argentina in 1916. He not only scorned the cattle and banking barons, but also showed no love for their most respected cultural institution,

<sup>32</sup> See Roberto Caamaño. "Organización de los abonos," in Caamaño. ed., *Historia del Teatro Colón*. vol. 3. pp. 293-295.

<sup>33</sup> Wage scales in Scobie, *Buenos Aires*, table 7. p. 266.

<sup>34</sup> For a cogent study of the Unión Cívica Radical see David Rock. *Politics in Argentina, 1890-1910: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

the opera. Although the ceremony of his office and the prestige of the Colón compelled him to appear, Yrigoyen often came to the opera late and left early. Such an attitude served to reinforce an elitelore view of opera as a refuge of the civilized from the philistine president, mockingly referred to as the *peludo* (armadillo), because of his inexpressiveness.<sup>35</sup>

The decade of the twenties can be characterized as ever more international in its outlook, above all seeking to raise Argentina's prestige abroad. This internationalism reinforced the general belief that the Colón was the most significant indicator of cultural progress in Argentina, a self-deception the oligarchy continued to support. The president from 1922 until 1928 typified this attitude. Marcelo T. de Alvear, although nominally a Radical, was a full-fledged member of the elite (signaled by possession of a family box at the Colón), a cosmopolitan who had served as his country's ambassador in Paris. He had married a Portuguese soprano, Regina Pacini, a rather daring act both because her vocation was looked down upon by de Alvear's social peers and because she was a foreigner. Although she stopped singing professionally, the couple remained ardent opera devotees; their wide-ranging and somewhat adventurous taste opened the Colón to the currents of more contemporary music. Consequently a theater which had been entirely Italian ate-all operas, even German and French, were performed in Italian -initiated a *stagione* system, in which "seasons" of Italian (the longest), French, and German opera alternated and were offered in their original language by native singers. A variety of more contemporary European works had their Latin American premieres, giving the Colón a reputation for experimentation among first-rank opera houses. The arrival of a German company for a complete Wagnerian *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle, a Russian troupe, and even a Japanese soprano to perform *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini enabled the Buenos Aires newspapers to link Argentine culture with diverse pans of the globe at the same time as leadership sought new opportunities and stronger international participation in trade.

The keynote of the twenties was a type of nationalism which looked outward, and Argentina's role on the world stage was enhanced by the brilliant operatic stage of the de Alvear period. But the elite felt the expansion of the Colón's capability to be essential. They sought less dependence upon purely imported productions from Europe and more status for Argentine achievements. Two efforts supported this objective. First, the presentation of Argentine-composed operas was encouraged

<sup>35</sup> One anecdote made the rounds that Yrigoyen liked to be brought *empanadas* (meal pies) in the presidential box because he disliked eating at the elaborate buffet served at intermissions. From a gossip-laden popular account of Blas Matamoro, *El Teatro Colón* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1972), p. 84.

## ELITELORE AT THE OPERA

in the hope that they might find a place in' the European repertoire. A work by an Argentine composer (*Aurora* by Hector Panizza) had appeared during the year the Colón opened; other operas by Argentines followed, although the librettos often had old world locales. The presentation in 1926 of Constantino Gaito's *Ollantai*, with its ancient Andean setting, marked a significant emergence of an Argentine "school" of operatic composers (even though it was performed in Italian at the insistence of the European singers). The acknowledged masterpiece from a national's pen was produced in 1929: *El Matrero* by Felipe Boero, a moving tragedy based on gaucho life.<sup>36</sup> Thereafter, Argentine themes at the Colón declined.

A second indicator of the "Argentinization" of the Colón can be seen in the establishment of its own musical infrastructure of orchestra, chorus, and ballet. The practice had been to have a well-trained nucleus of each of these components arrive on the ships which brought the principal singers from Europe; local hires amplified the groups whenever necessary. The resulting restrictions on the theater became apparent in the unsettled years of the First World War. In response, the management established permanent organizations within the Colón in order to free it from external control of its programming. Each element quickly became a famed entity in its own right, particularly the chorus, which was known for its magnificent sound. For some time it continued to sing only in Italian, however, even if the soloists used another language. The orchestra enhanced its reputation by functioning as a symphonic unit under a series of famous guest conductors. The ballet company expanded its capabilities from the small opera sequences to a regular dance season at the Colón.

The period from 1930 to 1943 has been called the *decada infame* (infamous decade) by those who deplored the military uprising of September 6, 1930. Some two years earlier, an aged Hipólito Yrigoyen had returned to the presidency. He and the traditional elite remained at odds, and although Yrigoyen was principally discredited by the circumstances of the world depression and his own incompetence, the Colón served as a symbol of the Radical party's failures. The seasons of 1929 and 1930 proved disastrous and charges of mismanagement and acceptance of bribes from the concessionaires in Italy led to fears that porteños would be "without the Colón."<sup>37</sup> One of the aims of the conservative government which took power after Yrigoyen's fall in 1930 was to restore the theater to its former glory by once again placing it firmly

<sup>36</sup> On Argentine operas see Maria Elena Kus, "Nativistic Strains in Argentine Operas Premiered at the Teatro Colón (1908-1972)," Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1976,

<sup>37</sup> Matamoro, *El Teatro Colón*. p. 35.

in the hands of the historic families, of which General José F. Uriburu, the new president, was a member. The *intendente* (mayor) of Buenos Aires announced that the 1931 season would be under the direct control of a professional administrator, rather than a European impresario, who had previously chosen the repertoire and singers. The full *municipalización*, or complete control of the Colón by the city of Buenos Aires, took place by 1933 with the appointment of a board of governors-members of the elite-to work with the director. Henceforth, artistic control would be firmly in the hands of Argentines.

These changes resulted in notable achievements. The 1931 Colón season was proclaimed a musical triumph by the critics.<sup>38</sup> The succeeding years, until the Second World War prevented the annual June through September residency of European singers, proved to be a "golden age." The present director of the Frankfurt Opera, Michael Gellin, one of the many Central European exiles in Buenos Aires during the thirties, noted: "that was a great period for opera at the Teatro Colón with Erich Kleiber and Fritz Busch coming every year ... and for the French repertory Albert Wolff. As a boy of fourteen, I was dazzled by the beauty of the fabulous Brazilian soprano Bidú Sayão and by Zinka Milanov, a great star of the Italian repertory."<sup>39</sup> Not only did the management sign the greatest voices, but the excellent directors made the performances truly dramatic. The Colón's reputation for diversity, from standard popular favorites to avant-garde works, increased. Despite the economic constraints imposed by the depression, Argentina's elite made it clear that opera of the highest quality must be financed and indeed, year after year, the Colón provided opera seasons renowned throughout Europe and the Western Hemisphere. The military, which had taken over in 1930, had learned that the tarnished image of Argentina's democracy could be burnished by international artistic success.

The gran mundo (social elite)<sup>40</sup> of the past hoped that their presence in the boxes at the Colón was still what mattered most. In fact, the control assumed by the municipality and the excellence of the productions benefited an ever-widening audience; those who had grown up in the paraiso were ready to move to the balcony and even to the orchestra. This "downward" mobility resulted from greater economic opportunity in an industrializing Argentina, where import substitution was necessi-

<sup>38</sup> *El Teatro Colón: cincuenta años de gloria*, p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas P. Lanier, "Man with a Plan," *Opera News* 46: 19 (May 1982), 22.

<sup>40</sup> Refers specifically to those: men who belonged to the exclusive clubs, such as the Jockey or Circulo de Armas. See memoir by an important member of these clubs, Carlos Ibarguren, *Le historia que he vivido* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Peuser, 1955), especially pp. 348-349.

tated by the depression. Ticket prices also tended to decrease during the thirties, since the costs of production were falling. The management was able to produce a much longer season-up to ten months of opera, ballet, and concerts-and so many more people passed through the doors of the Colón. A clear shift toward the middle class was taking place in the theater; a cultural elite was replacing the monied elite of the past in the making of decisions which controlled the Colón.

From the standpoint of the oligarchy, the most serious threat to exclusive authority over its operatic shrine came from untraditional uses of the theater. In the late twenties the socialists, cognizant of the legitimacy the use of the Colón as a forum would give to their movement, had managed to offer programs of speeches and serious music there as part of their May First celebrations.<sup>41</sup> In the thirties the tango, a working class dance and song form originating in the cafes of Buenos Aires, was performed on the stage of the Colón. Inevitably a tango was composed, caned "Mis Noches de Colón" ("My Nights at the Colón"). The film industry featured the Colón as a setting for such popular singers as Libertad Lamarque.<sup>42</sup> In short, the elitelore which had paved the way toward an identification of the Colón with its wealthy patrons and which had consequently equated the greatness of the theater with that of the nation under the oligarchy's leadership began to give way to a less exclusive image; The effort to restore the Colón to the hands of the upper class ended in a theater more and more open to middle and even working class identification.

The Second World War further strained the capability of Argentina to import the singers it needed, although Central European exiles furnished the requirements for excellent German-language productions. It was during the postwar period that the image of the Colón as an elite institution finally changed, and the key factor was the assumption of power by Juan Domingo Peron and Eva Duarte de Peron. The Perón years completed the process started a decade earlier by wrenching the lore connected with the Colón out of the hands of the wealthy elite and then forging the new image of a theater for the *descamisados* (shirtless ones, the Peronist working class). In fact, Perón used the opera soon after his inauguration on June 4, 1946, to appear there in shirt sleeves, an affront to the Colón's traditions and its patrons. Before a noisy crowd of union officials, he rallied support for his five-year economic plan.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *La Prensa*, May 1, 1928, p. 1, reports the noisy antics of the working class in the balconies and the playing of the "International," as well as a scene from Rossini's *Barber of Seville*.

<sup>42</sup> Matamoro, *El Teatro Colón*, p. 77.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Fraser and Marysa Navarro, *Eva Peron* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), pp.77-78.

In the decade that followed one can discern three stages in the relationship of Peronism to the Colón.

The initial period lasted about a year and was characterized by the attempt to take away from the oligarchy all the spectacle associated with important "galas." The independence festivities of May 25, 1947, were just such an occasion. The press reported ecstatically on the appearance of General Perón and his wife, accompanied by a coterie of cabinet ministers, in the presidential box. They arrived dramatically at 9:10 P.M., after the house was filled and had been kept waiting past the usual prompt starting time; they paraded around during the intermissions of *The Barber of Seville*, enjoying a supper reception, until the event ended at 1:25 the next morning.<sup>44</sup> The Peróns' tactic of trying to outshine the wealthy upper class soon turned to open hostility and confrontation, particularly because of the snubbing given to Evita by the charitable Sociedad de Beneficencia, controlled by the women who adorned the society pages of Buenos Aires's newspapers. This shift in attitude surrounded an event associated with the Colón. In late September 1948 the government denounced a plot to assassinate the Peróns as they attended the opera scheduled for Día de la Raza, the October 12 Columbus Day celebration.<sup>45</sup> The couple seldom appeared in the presidential box after that and commentators have viewed the 1948 season as the last unqualified triumph the Colón would enjoy.<sup>46</sup>

The next phase was dedicated toward disseminating high culture among the working class, in the belief that the heritage of the elite could belong to all Argentines. The lore surrounding the Colón dictated that possessing the theater gave the working class power. An initial step was taken as early as 1946, when the Peronist-dominated city government decreed *funciones populares* (Popular functions), performances outside of the abonos, at very reduced prices, in order to "make the theater accessible to all the public regardless of economic circumstances."<sup>47</sup> This practice was taken further by a significant decree in 1950 that established regular free attendance for members of the Peronist labor union, the Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT), on Saturday nights and also mandated *funciones popularísimas* (note the augmentative, very popular, indicating exceedingly inexpensive to attend) on Sun-

<sup>44</sup> *La Nación*, May 26, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> John Barnes, *Evita, First Lady: A Biography of Eva Perón* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), pp. 103-104.

<sup>46</sup> *El Teatro Colón: Cincuenta años de gloria*, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> Marguerite Garland, *Mas alla del gran telón: el Teatro Colón en su faz incógnita* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1948), p. 139. Seats for regular performances remained inexpensive under the price controls of the Peron years: 10 pesos for an orchestra seat in 1948 (when the exchange rate was 1 dollar = 7 pesos on the free market) and 30 pesos in 1954 (1 dollar = 25 pesos).

day afternoons; these changes nullified two of the traditional Colón abonos.<sup>48</sup> Another order required symphony orchestras that played at the Colón to perform in cinemas around Buenos Aires. Official pressure forced the Colón management to employ Argentine singers as principals, a policy much approved by the nationalistic fervor of the time. The press hailed the rousing *La Bohème* of May 25, 1948, another independence day gala, when Argentine soprano Helena Arizmendi appeared with the most famous tenor of the day, Beniamino Gigli.<sup>49</sup> In succeeding years international opera stars came less frequently to Buenos Aires, while local singers took over a greater part of the repertoire. *Buenos Aires Musical*, an independent weekly, saw these efforts to disseminate serious music as a success and an inevitable and much-needed democratization of the Colón.<sup>50</sup>

The final stage in the Peronist attitude toward the Colón was a concerted effort to undermine the reputation of the theater. Directors of production were changed continually on the basis of political rather than artistic considerations. An "interventor" (an official appointed by higher authority in order to correct alleged abuses) would assume control of the Colón in mid-season, thus destroying continuity in planning. The result was described as "functions arranged by various official deals outside of any artistic intention or interest, a practice which continued until the downfall of the government of Juan D. Perón."<sup>51</sup> Another assault by the Peronists came when the municipal government opened an outdoor facility on March 25, 1953. The Teatro Eva Perón, in the Parque Centenario, would, according to its supporters, provide better opera to the descamisados for a pittance. The initial production in the theater, named for Perón's then-deceased wife, was appropriately *Aida*, the story of a feminine nationalist who sacrificed her life for love and country.<sup>52</sup>

By 1954 the lamentations about the fall of one of the world's great opera houses had become widespread. Once again publications viewed the destiny of Argentina as symbolically related to the status of its opera theater. As Perón was destroying the Colón, he was simultaneously ruining the nation's cultural prestige. *Buenos Aires Musical* lamented, "In recent

<sup>48</sup> Cumaño, "Organización de los abonos." in Caamaño. Ed., *La historia del Teatro Colón*. vol. 3, p. 294.

<sup>49</sup> *La Prensa*, May 26, 1948, p. 16. Gigli was recorded that year in the Colón to great applause (*Gigli: Live from the Great Opera Houses of the World, 1916-1952*, MDP Records, 018).

<sup>50</sup> *Buenos Aires Musical*, May 16, 1956, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Caamaño, ed., *La historia del Teatro Colón*, Vol. 2, p. 492.

<sup>52</sup> *Buenos Aires Musical*, April 1, 1953, p. 5.

times, matters have gone so badly in the Teatro Colón that we have become very alarmed concerning its future... The signs that now can be observed in the heavens over the Teatro Colón are unfortunately those of a total decadence ... the failure of a regime.<sup>53</sup>

The Peronists, of course, saw their relationship to the Colón in a very different light. They had eliminated a bastion of the hated oligarchy and turned it over to the workers. In the last days of this Perón presidency, the Colón administration staged the most trivial expressions of popular culture. It seemed that the traditional elite's monopoly over the lore connected with the Colón had been broken, but the Peronists had failed in their objective: to turn the theater into a center with which Argentina's working class could identify, into what might have been the spectacle of a people's stage in the oligarch's palace. Yet once the elite's role in connection with the Colón had been challenged, the symbol and function of the opera house could never be the same again.

Unhappy times have ensued. Since the uprising which overthrew Perón in 1955, the Colón, like Argentina itself, has seemed suspended between past and future. Military governments particularly hoped to eliminate the role of Peronism at the opera house and restore its former renown. In 1956 the interventor appointed as theater director chose to attack the essence of Peronist policy by decreeing the termination of *funciones popularisimas*, the special days when opera was offered to the public at extremely modest prices. He was forced to rescind his order in the face of widespread objections and the *funciones* have persisted. Further mismanagement led to the ultimate humiliation—the cancellation of the entire 1957 season. With the connection between opera and the elite leadership destroyed, the Colón's reputation was in serious jeopardy.

The year 1958 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the second Teatro Colón. The official commemoration was a volume entitled *Fifty Years of Glory*, but the-bitter appraisal of Argentina's most respected music critic represented a forlorn cry for renewal:

The Teatro Colón, after fifty years of scenic life, has no tradition... in the most flagrant manner the Colón has betrayed its obligation because the true, unique and urgent obligation that the Teatro Colón has is that of transforming itself into a model that serves as an example for all those in our country who have something to do, from afar or dose up, with culture and specifically with art. A model of organization, a model of responsibility and a model institution. That and only that is the reason for its existence.<sup>54</sup>

The twenty-five years since this was published have witnessed attempts to check the dwindling of the Colón's reputation as a first-rank opera

<sup>53</sup> *Buenos Aires Musical*, November 15, 1954, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Jorge D'Urbano, *Música en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1966), p. 330.

house, but with little success. Within Argentina successive governments, and especially those led by generals, have continued to tell their fellow citizens, and the world, that the Colón reflects the nation's prestige. General Juan Carlos Onganía's regime declared that the Colón was "one of the most precious resources of the cultural patrimony of Argentina,"<sup>55</sup> while a recent publication for English-speaking tourists colorfully announced that "it is on the short list of the world's most important opera houses."<sup>56</sup>

To ensure a renaissance of opera at the Colón required less, not more, political pressure. In 1960, during the period of the civilian presidency of Arturo Frondizi, the city government of Buenos Aires decreed that the municipal council would install a three-member board of professionals, rather than just well-known society names, for a three-year term in order to provide for adequate planning, as successful opera seasons demanded schedules made years in advance. The theater's budget throughout the 1960s stayed at about \$3.5 million annually (rather low by comparison with other large opera houses such as the Metropolitan in New York which spent about five times as much) and ticket prices remained modest, in the range of \$3 to \$10.<sup>57</sup>

Despite government efforts, the Colón has slipped into second-rank status among the world's opera companies. As it almost always has, this reflects the vicissitudes of Argentina itself, particularly the weakness of its elites-wealthy families, military officers, and new technocrats. These groups could not overcome the international forces buffeting the Colón, such as competition from the burgeoning phenomenon of European summer festivals (so that singers have been less available in July and August, the height of the Buenos Aires winter season) and the rapid descent of the Argentine peso's value at a time when lyric drama has become ever more expensive to mount.

Nevertheless, the Colón has remained a center of interest-and at times, controversy-to this day. Questions of censorship have arisen. Waxing moralistic, military regimes banned works such as *Bomarzo* by the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera, because of its supposedly lewd themes, and even Igor Stravinsky's 1913 ballet, *Rite of Spring*, one of the landmarks of twentieth-century music. Recently an outcry arose when the Chase Manhattan Bank mounted a gala for the visit to Buenos Aires of David Rockefeller; nationalistic Argentines disliked "leasing" the Colón to a foreign corporation. When Luciano Pavarotti, the popular tenor, was scheduled to sing in June 1982, his appearance

<sup>55</sup> Municipalidad de I. Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *El Teatro Colón de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, 1968), p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Argentine Republic, *Argentina* (N.p., n.d.), p. 53;

<sup>57</sup> Roberto Caamaño, "The Colón Theater in Buenos Aires," *Inter-American Music Bulletin* 54 (July, 1966), 6.

had to be cancelled because of the Malvinas crisis. Outside Argentina, the major publications on opera, *Opera News* in the United States, *Opera* in England, and *Opernwelt* in Germany, have reported regularly on the Buenos Aires season. Foreign critics have been generally negative. When a group from the Colón traveled to a festival in Austria, *Opera* noted that "the less said about the performances of the Teatro Colón ensemble, the better .... They received some vicious reviews in the Viennese press, which was not surprising, for their standard of production was embarrassingly provincial."<sup>58</sup>

Still the Teatro Colón remains the symbol of a celebrated musical past and the hope for an illustrious present and future. The elitelore surrounding the Teatro Colón has given it a unique historical place in Argentina's cultural life. A recent feature article in the *Los Angeles Times* indicates that elitelore still survives at the Teatro Colón:

[I]t is the opera that creates hysteria and is the real foundation for Buenos Aires' worldwide reputation as a music center... for whatever reason the world's great orchestras, singers and instrumentalists come to Buenos Aires. . . . The setting of the Colón is a throwback to turn-of-the-century luxury: plush seats, crystal chandeliers, renaissance ceiling murals, velvet drapes. On opening night the men in the audience wear tuxedos and the women don gowns, furs and jewelry providing a literal meaning to the term Diamond Horseshoe, the exclusive ring of private boxes that form a semicircle above the main floor.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Buenos Aires Musical*, November 15, 1954, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Jorge D'Urbano, *Música en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1966), p. 330.