

ROBERT L. LARSEN

(1934-2021)

Robert L. Larsen, Founder and Artistic Director Emeritus of Des Moines Metro Opera and Professor Emeritus of Music at Simpson College, has died. Dr. Larsen passed away peacefully in Indianola on Sunday, March 21, 2021. The announcement was made by DMMO General and Artistic Director Michael Egel. Known in music circles as the “Wizard of Iowa,” Dr. Larsen achieved widespread acclaim by almost single-handedly founding an annual summer opera festival amidst the Midwestern cornfields and guiding the organization to national prominence.



Robert LeRoy Larsen was born into a farming family just outside the tiny town of Walnut, Iowa, on November 28, 1934. By age ten he was immersed in rigorous piano instruction and had become obsessed with the Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera. The young musician entered Simpson College to study piano with Sven Lekberg. He subsequently attended the University of Michigan for graduate study, returned to join the music faculty at Simpson, and completed his doctorate in opera coaching and conducting at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. His piano studies were with Sven Lekberg, Joseph Brinkman, Rudolph Ganz and Walter Bricht. He worked as a conductor with Tibor Kozma and Wolfgang Vacano and with Boris Godovsky in stage direction. Along the way, he received what might have been considered an irresistible offer to join the conducting staff of the Met. Larsen, however, had a different ambition – a resolve to bring professionally produced opera to a middle-American audience who had limited opportunity to experience the art form.

Larsen’s first efforts resulted in Des Moines Civic Opera, which mounted two productions before he conceded the experience taught him “everything about how *not* to organize a company and board.” Then in 1973 he struck operatic gold with the formation of Des Moines Metro Opera with his co-founder and friend Douglas Duncan, utilizing the summer festival format and intimate performance space within Blank Performing Arts Center at Simpson College. Larsen perceptively realized he would need to strategically augment a repertory of accessible standards to cultivate developing audiences with more unusual fare that would potentially attract the attention of national audiences. His first season included Puccini’s *La Rondine* (a virtual rarity at that time), Benjamin Britten’s *Albert Herring*, and a double bill of Menotti’s *The Medium* paired with the North American premiere of Arthur Benjamin’s *Prima Donna*. His later seasons brought the world premiere of Lee Hoiby’s *The Tempest* and a rare American mounting of Weber’s *Der Freischütz*. The formula worked. *Opera News* magazine showed up that first year, followed by *Opera Now* and a host of major market newspapers, all of which helped to establish DMMO as one of America’s leading regional performing arts entities. The company’s subscription base quickly came to represent 40 states, most Iowa counties and several countries.



Larsen mounted some 120 productions in 37 seasons, functioning as both conductor and stage director. This dual role resulted in an unusually cohesive fusion of musical and dramatic values. Although his command over a vast range of repertory was formidable, he displayed particular affinity for American works at a time when many companies were ignoring them. Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* and *Susannah* as well as Blitzstein's *Regina*, the major works of Menotti and three near-definitive mountings of Robert Ward's *The Crucible* were highlights of his stewardship. He never shied from controversy and even presented nudity onstage in Richard Strauss' *Salome*. A roguish humor evidenced itself on Independence Day performances when Larsen would conduct the national anthem using a blazing sparkler as a baton.



Dr. Larsen served as Chair of the Department of Music at Simpson for 33 years, where he taught from 1957 until 2017. A consummate educator, he began an undergraduate opera program there, taught pianists, and lectured extensively on music history and theory, notably in a specialty course on Medieval and Renaissance literature. He coached and accompanied vocalists and founded a beloved chorus of Madrigal singers, whose concerts, European tours, and Christmas dinner performances became college and Midwestern traditions. Music lovers and artists frequently gathered at his Indianola home for DMMO and college events and to marvel at his remarkable collection of European antiques (some of which found their way onto the DMMO stage as props) and a basement styled *à la La Bohème's* Café Momus. Larsen was a remarkable solo and collaborative pianist, and he was well known for his collaborative performances with students, faculty and major performing artists including bass-baritone Simon Estes. Whether as professor or impresario, he nurtured the careers of countless musicians, many of

whom enjoy international careers. He was selected as a recipient of the first Governor's Award in Music in 1973 and the 1990 Iowa Arts Award presented by the Iowa Arts Council.

"Robert's sense of awe and wonder for great works of music and art knew no bounds," Michael Egel reflects. "His fierce passion for and devotion to sharing that love with colleagues, students and audiences through teaching and performing led thousands of people to this magnificent art form, forever changing the lives of so many. We are all forever in his debt. Nothing will ever quite be the same." That passion remained with Larsen after his retirement and on to the end. During a celebratory gathering in DMMO's lobby following the 2017 season, Larsen was seen to pull himself from his wheelchair to greet a young singer who had enjoyed a considerable success with the company that year. "Isn't he a find?" Larsen enthused, his eyes sparkling once the singer had moved on. "Extraordinary voice. It's so wonderful to encounter new voices like that."



Robert Larsen is survived by two nephews: Richard Healy (Maria Louisa Magcalas) of Seal Beach, CA, and Gary Healy of Oakland, CA; a great-nephew: Nathan Healy; as well as numerous friends in Indianola. He was preceded in death by his parents G. Dewey (1962) and Maine Larsen (1996), his sister Dorothy Healy (1972) and brother-in-law Early Healy (2015). Visitations will be held on Friday, March 26, from 3-8pm at the Overton Funeral Home in Indianola and on Saturday, March 27, from 9:00-10:30am at the First Presbyterian Church in Walnut, IA. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, no public graveside service is planned. When it is safe to do so, Des Moines Metro Opera will host a Memorial Concert for all to pay their respects and celebrate Larsen's extraordinary life. Further details will be available at a later date. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be directed to the Robert L. Larsen Scenic Fund at the Des Moines Metro Opera Foundation.