

Calendar

Opera Rescue

Small-Opera Workshop

News flash from Pandeli Lazaridi, founding director of the Small Opera of San Diego: Life is unfair.

"A lot of talented people are totally ignored."

Lazaridi (pronounced lazz-ah-REE-dee) has been teaching voice for 38 years, 11 of them in San Diego; so this is the region where he has seen most of that overlooked talent lately. A native of Greece, he himself was once considered a talent. He says he began to enter — and to win — singing competitions as a teenager in Athens, placing first in 35 of

those contests by the time he was 17. But Lazaridi didn't make a career of performing.

"I was a baritone who loved tenor music, so I was very disappointed." Besides, he says, one had to be "connected" to secure a place at the opera house in his city. He gradually came to prefer teaching to performing, anyway.

He feels pity for his San Diego students, however. "It's very hard for classical singers here, because there is only the San Diego Opera, and people tend to get into the chorus only, and that's if extras are needed. There is also the Opera Ensemble, but it consists of six people. How many opportunities are there for all those others who have studied so hard and so long?"

He feels sorry, too, for local opera lovers. "The San Diego Opera's season is only five months long. The Opera Ensemble goes around introducing opera to people, but for only half the year." And, of course, tickets are expensive. Lazaridi says, "I want to tell



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ALLEN

Benjamin Lopez (left)

the whole world that there is a small place in San Diego where people can come and enjoy opera all year long, and it won't cost them anything unless they choose to make a little donation to keep us going."

He is speaking of the "Opera Workshop" that occurs every Sunday night at his Academy of Sound & Music downtown. "I provide this space to promote the local talents," he says, "and give them a place to perform regularly, so they can polish their skills in front of an audience. It's a way for them to be recognized somehow."

There is no cost to the performers, who are asked to prepare two or three arias from operas or operettas, and to bring two copies of sheet music for each selection. Lazaridi provides the piano accompanist.

As many as 15 people sing each Sunday, says Lazaridi. The age range is 17 to 75. "There are some older, talented people that I want to point out to the audience and to the

people of San Diego. If they'd had proper training when they were young, they'd be somewhere near the top today."

The benefit of a such a program to inexperienced performers is in learning that audiences are not "monsters," says Lazaridi. He believes, too, that an audience improves a singer's performance. "Even one person makes a singer motivated to be singing better."

After the performance, audience and performers mingle, and Lazaridi gives critiques. "Singers ask me how they did, and I offer them tips." One free lesson is offered, too. "Sometimes I give them two or three free lessons," says Lazaridi, who is trying to recruit new students, it is clear.

Less obviously, he is trying to recruit patrons. "All my students are working 40 hours a week, because they have to survive. So they come home from work and are all drained down. They have to study at night, but they don't have that much left in endurance and inspiration. They turn on the TV to relax a little. Watch the news. They say, 'I'll study later.' But then it's 10:00 and they have to go to bed, because they have to wake up at 6:00 the next morning to go to work. So I am trying to find sponsors for the best talents" — i.e., financially able opera lovers who

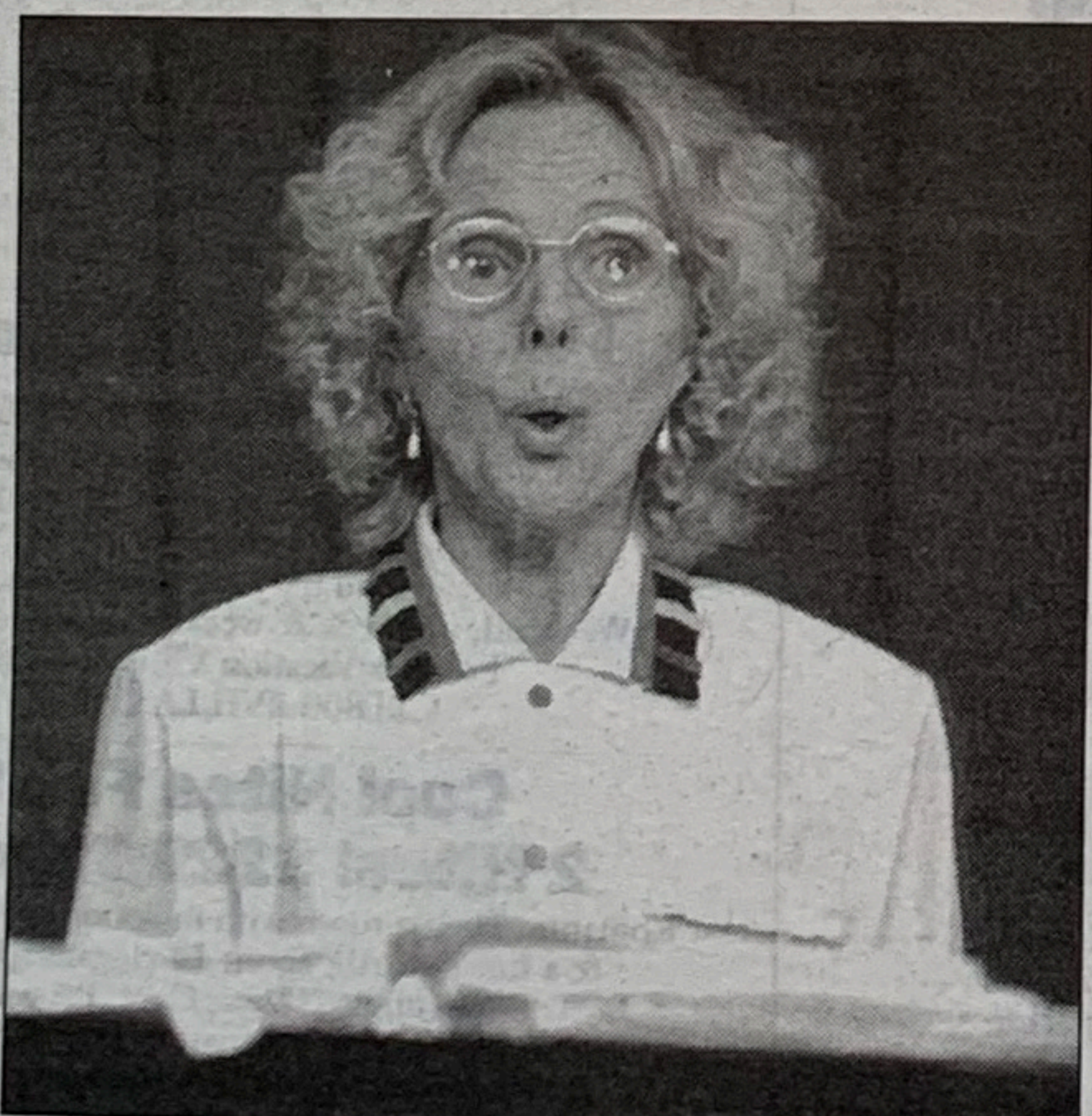
would be willing to support them.

He admits no patrons have yet materialized.

In the meantime, what do the best talents sound like? Would even someone who just wanders in one Sunday evening be able to pick them out? Unequivocally, yes, says Lazaridi. "Even though they may be beginners, you can't miss them, they're so strong. The difference is obvious when they just stand up and start. It's the sound, but it's also a shining, a sparkling in the eye, in the soul. A talent is a talent — it cannot hide. And if we take that talent and mold it, we can make people here in San Diego proud. 'Don't let people go to waste,' I want to say. 'Help them.' I am ready to break. I'm not sure how much longer I can go on. I am praying to God that I get some attention for them, so they can find a little brighter day in their lives."

— Jeanne Schinto

"Opera Workshop"
Opera Gala Room
Academy of Sound & Music
1495 C Street, at 15th Street,
across from City College,
downtown
Every Sunday at 7:00 p.m.
Suggested donation: \$5
Info: 619-702-1495



Viola M. Rohling

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