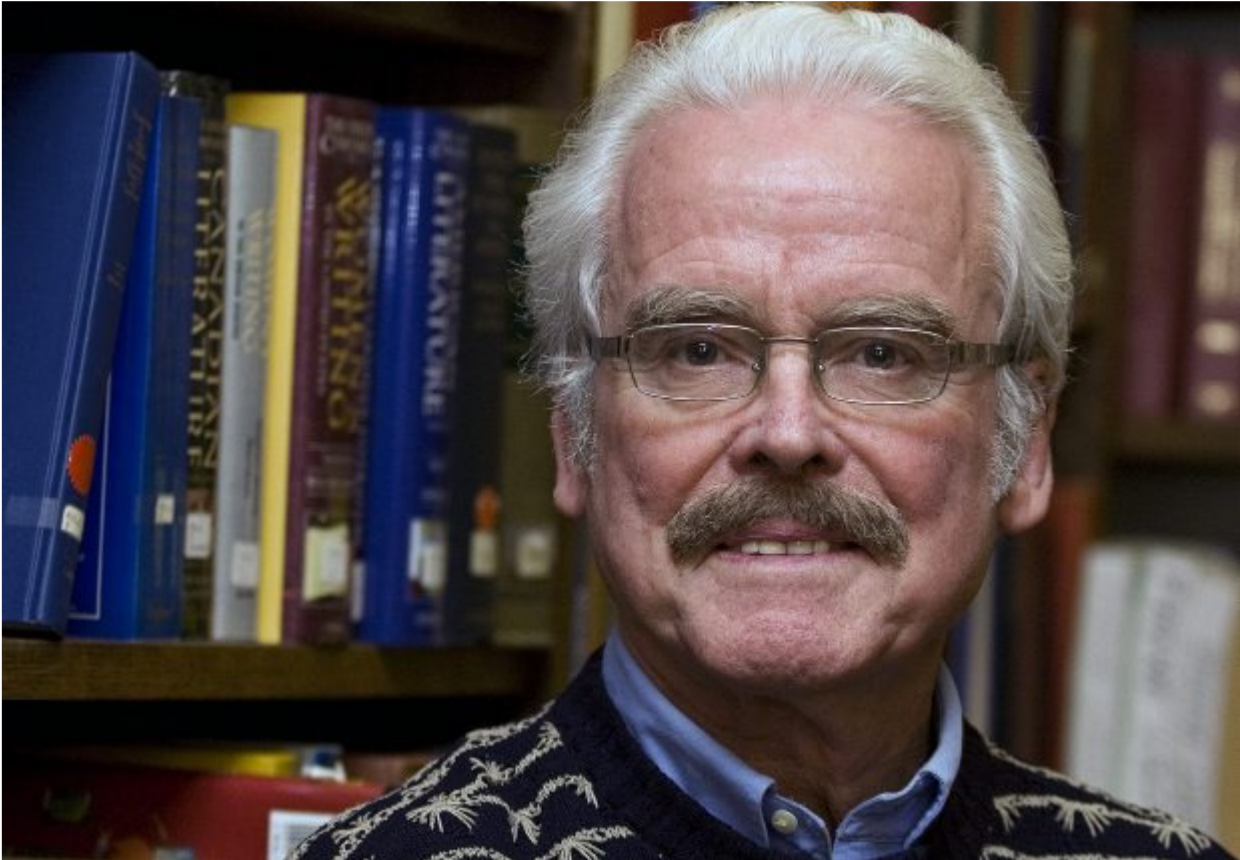


Opera d'amore

Passion for Italian language and music drove 12-year book project

BY ADRIAN CHAMBERLAIN, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 21, 2010



Robert Thomson's new book provides an insight into the characters in Italian operas through an analysis of the language in the libretto.

Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Times Colonist

I think the best stories are about passionate people. They're the ones that stick with you years later.

Take, for example, the late Victoria sculptor Roland Brener. I still vividly remember interviewing him -- and that was 20 years ago. Brener liked to make strange kinetic sculptures. Some used cannibalized bits of mechanical toys; a dissected Teddy Ruxpin comes to mind.

When speaking about his art -- or anything that interested him -- Brener projected a big-hearted, contagious enthusiasm. For some reason, I recall him being especially knocked out by the hip-hop group, De La Soul, because of their crazy use of samples.

I've met other super-passionate, creative folk: sculptor Mowry Baden, composer Christopher Butterfield, theatre director Glynis Leyshon, conductor Timothy Vernon. Victoria writer Robert Thomson seems a kindred spirit, although his interests are different.

Like Brener, Thomson is driven by powerful, deep-seated passions. In his case, they are language and opera. With his recently published book, *Operatic Italian*, the two meld rather spectacularly.

Thomson is an expert on his subject. He's a life-long opera devotee armed with a PhD in romance languages from Yale University. The self-published *Operatic Italian* is a useful tool, especially for the serious opera fan or professional singer. At 453 pages, it's an incredible labour of love; in a way, the book is Thomson's love letter to opera.

He has been writing *Operatic Italian*, on and off, since 1998 (a previous, much shorter version -- *Italian for the Opera* -- was also published). This book fills a gap. Currently, he says, no books target the use of Italian in opera, although there are, of course, books on Italian grammar.

Italian for the Opera is not a book for the faint-hearted. It is an exhaustive examination of the use of Italian in opera. Parts of speech are rigorously analyzed. Atmospheric adjectives are discussed. Nuances in operatic exclamations are dissected. Outdated expressions used in vintage libretti are considered. Opera lovers are encouraged to "think in Italian."

Operatic Italian may seem an intimidating tome. Certainly, tackling it required more brainpower than perusing the seemingly endless river of self-help books and mysteries that land at this newspaper's doorstep. Yet, for the patient reader, there are rewards. It's a gold mine of information, with scads of excerpts from operas, historical background and web links so the reader can listen as well.

Most importantly, *Operatic Italian* helps give you insight about what the characters are really saying, thinking and feeling.

Thomson's zeal for his subject is obvious. He's sent me almost 30 e-mails to do with his book. He's an interesting guy. A native Vancouverite, he grew up in a tough neighbourhood, joining a street gang just to avoid getting hassled.

His life changed in 1951, when the 11-year-old was taken to see *The Great Caruso* starring Mario Lanza. The movie about the great tenor Enrico Caruso "really cooked my goose," said Thomson. He became a life-long opera addict.

We seem to live in an age when most of us want a quick fix. In this regard, *Operatic Italian* is an unfashionable book. It is aimed at those who realize, when it comes to the arts, you get out what you put in. Yet, for those willing to make an effort, the rewards are vast.

The book is available at Munro's Books, the University of Victoria bookstore or directly from Thomson: www.godwinbooks.com

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Eight Cowichan Valley authors are thrilled their book of short stories, *Kissed on a Boat*, was chosen for the prestigious London Book Fair in England.

Published by Arts Angels Publishing of Chemainus, the book will be displayed in April alongside books by Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and other Canadian authors. The authors of *Kissed on a Boat* are part of the New Writers Group, based at the Cowichan Library.

Kissed on a Boat will be displayed later at the Massachusetts Library International Book Exhibit and at the Beijing Book Fair.

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