

# What's On

High note

Cezary's Picks

Ban of love

## Unknown Wagner

By Cezary Owerkowicz

Special to the Arab Times

‘One can’t judge Wagner’s opera Lohengrin after a first hearing, and I certainly don’t intend to hear it a second time’, Gioachino Rossini said about Wagner renowned operatic work.

It happened when Wagner was already acknowledged as opera composer and operas librettist, revolutionist of opera form through his concept of ‘total work of art’, establishing position of ‘guru’ for their fans.

However Richard Wagner (1813-1883) began to compose operas quite early – in his 20s. That was a turning point in life for the choir master at the Wurzberg Theater: He fell in love with the well-known actress in Magdeburg Theater, Christine Wilhelmine ‘Minna’ Planer, his future first wife, and composed his first complete opera. It was The Fairies.



Owerkowicz

NB: Just before he composed an unfinished opera The Wedding! The real wedding of the composer and actress took place in 1836.

Guards-priests and believers of the ‘Wagner Church’ (or to be more modest – sect) believed that their idol’s output starts from The Flying Dutchman. All earlier works were not accepted as almost kind of ‘apocrypha’, not worthwhile to be imputed to the Master. There was really sort of two steps ban – Ban for The Ban of Love! What is the evidence? The Premiere of The Wedding was produced in 1888, five years after Wagner passed away.

Presented

The Opera theaters are still the most frequent present works of Verdi, Puccini, Donizetti or Mozart. Wagner is already in place six of such a challenge of works presented every year.

However, only he has been idolized, creator of ‘total theater’, and a philosopher of opera. On that wave of interest of his early works, the attempt is even growing rapidly. During the past five years twenty-one world opera theaters, including the Madrid Teatro Real, have presented those ‘banned’ Wagner operas.

Finally ‘the ban for The Ban’ was also cancelled at the centre of Wagnerian cult, at Bayreuth Festival. During the 2013 Festival, Director, the great granddaughter of the composer, Katharine Wagner approved the presentation of all three Wagner’s early operas: The Fairies, The Ban of Love and Rienzi during the Festival in Bayreuth.

However the presentations were produced and presented aside the main Festival’s stream, not at the Theater on Green Hill but at Oberfrankenhalle, city hall which usually are presented as rock concerts.

First Wagner’s opera was The Fairies and composer’s followers find in it embryos of all ideas presented in his later output. However the second, The Ban of Love was the first work of Wagner that was staged. It had a place in 1836 at the Theater in Magdeburg. Yes, the same place where the composer met ‘Minni’. And thanks she was employed as ‘kappelmeister’ (as music director) and allowed to debut. It was a romantic but difficult time for him. Theater also was at the edge of bankruptcy.

The only solution looked to be performing light and easy, than the popular Italian and French operas. And in the same style The Ban of Love was composed. From the melodic and instrumentation style it was just a fashionable genre. A pinch of originality were rather the echoes of Carl Maria von Weber, not yet Wagnerian. Maybe Maestro Rossini would have a different opinion about ‘forbidden love’ and wouldn’t crush the young pretender so spite-

fully?

Wagner work, except literary ambitions, was gifted also by the writer talent. He is the author of all his operas librettos, except The Ban. As an author of libretto himself he presented a very good taste: his choice was William Shakespeare and his comedy Measure for Measure.

Of course, Wagner adjusted the story according to his beliefs. As born fighter and polemicist he turned the shaft of satire against bourgeois hypocrisy and the worst hypocrite changed into a German (Friedrich instead of original Shakespearean Angelo).

He became the governor of Sicilia and in the name of Puritanical principles imposed the ban on all amusements, feasts and love. Of course, he himself was not free from sins and temptations he blamed on the others. His hypocrisy was denounced but the people in revolutionary mood released political prisoners and enjoyed the feast.

Dedicated

That opera somehow shows a bit forgotten trait of young Wagner – his anarchical convictions, friendship with Bakunin and aversion to any tyranny. As a young man he demonstrated support and worked in Leipzig, Saxony to help the escapees from the just fallen November insurrection against Russian Emperor in Poland in 1863. The great evidence is the lovely dramatic Overture Polonia, written and dedicated to them.

Wagner described through an announcement his first staged opera as The Great Comic Opera. The premiere was poorly attended, with a lead singer who forgot the text of aria but then improvised the words.

There were even fist-fights between the lead tenor and prima Dona’s husband. The animosity between fighters remains unknown and is a subject of speculation only?

The husband probably won the duel because the lead tenor broke out backstage just before the curtain was raised.

Catastrophe

It was necessary to cancel second the performance attended by just 3 (three) people. Who has seen the legendary movie Greek Zorba, will remember the top exclamation of the hero – What a wonderful catastrophe! The same had happened with the Wagner Opera theater debut. Isn’t it unbelievable? Yes, but it truth.

NB. The Ban was never performed again during Wagner’s lifetime. Within a short time the composer recognized and promoted himself as The Genius of Opera and a lot of followers during his time and over the next centuries have recognized that... he was right, even the critics.

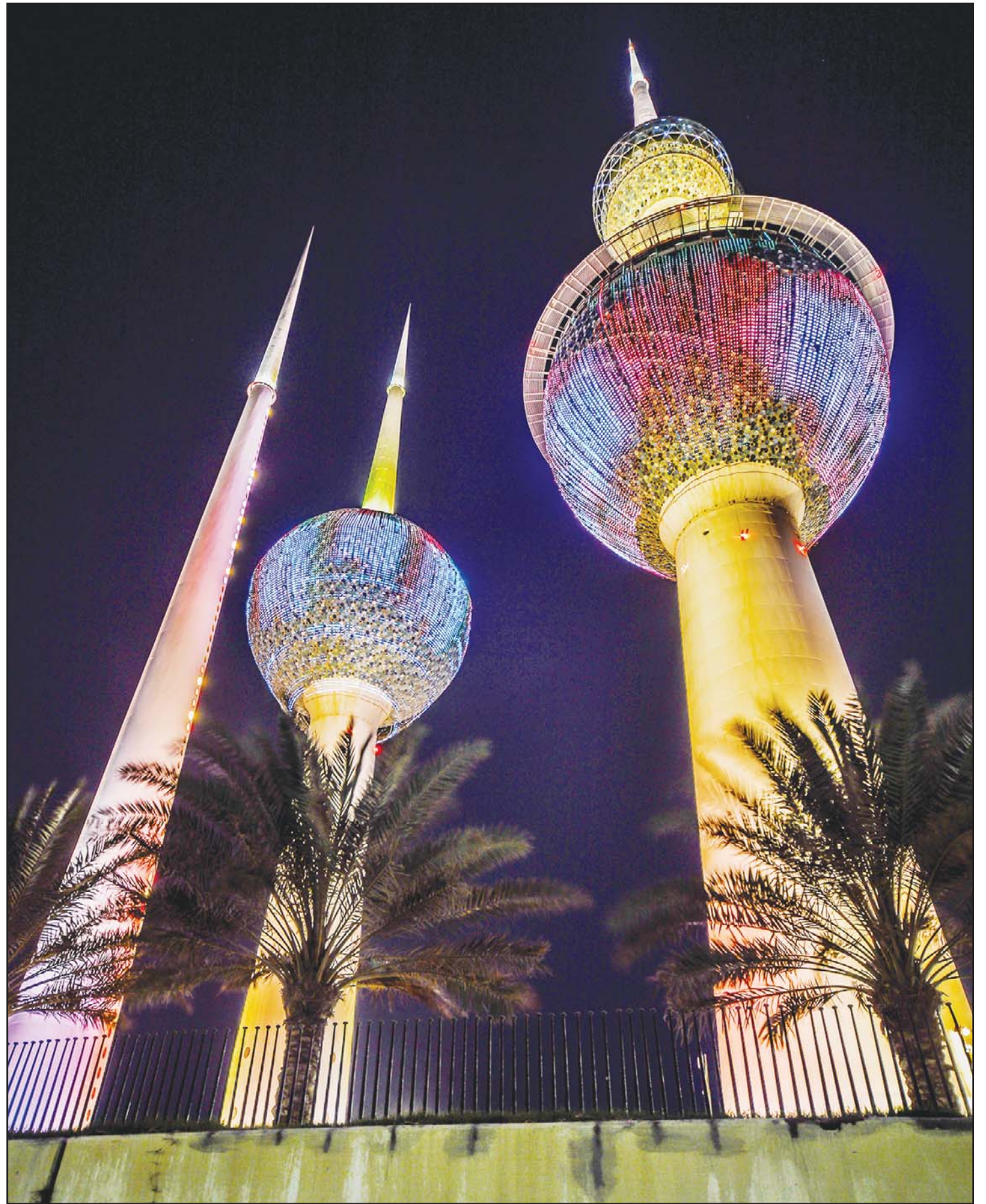
The first noticeable performance after the ‘wonderful catastrophe’ was at the Collegiate Theater of the University of London in February 1965, almost 230 years after the unforgettable premiere.

In North America was the first revival in 1983 but the work entered the real professional stage in July 2008 at the Glimmerglass Festival, coming back to the continental European stages of Leipzig, Moscow, Romania, Madrid and so on in 2013, after the presentation at Bayreuth (but in the suburbs of festival, in rock music hall – as above). On Wagner’s 200th anniversary of his birthday, there is no more ban on The Ban of Love. Better late than never, isn’t it?

Looks that it does not matter how it starts, it is important how it ends.

PS. I’m afraid that The Ban of Love always must be a total catastrophe, isn’t it? Fortunately, thanks to humanity.

Editor’s Note: Cezary Owerkowicz is the chairman of the Kuwait Chamber of Philharmonic and talented pianist. He regularly organizes concerts by well-known musicians for the benefit of music lovers and to widen the knowledge of music in Kuwait. His e-mail address is: cowerkowicz@yahoo.com and cowerkowicz@hotmail.com



A colorful night shot of Kuwait Towers (Hassan Jaloul – KUNA)

### Pioneers of Kuwait

#### Preserves Kuwait’s maritime heritage in his books

## Prof Yacoub prolific writer and researcher

This is the first in a series of articles on Prof Yacoub Yousef Al Hajji, a prolific writer, consultant and researcher.

— Editor

By Lidia Qattan

Special to the Arab Times

Professor Yacoub Yousef Al Hajji is a highly cultured, humble personality, an intellectual who strongly feels for his country and has been contributing through his writing to the memory of the life of which he admires the resilience, the creative resourcefulness and heroic endurance of his people in the pre-oil era.

Consultant and researcher at the Center of Research and Studies on Kuwait, the professor has been teaching environmental science at the Kuwait University, and education environment at the School of Education, besides lecturing at the Kuwait University.

After the liberation Dr Yacoub turned to writing, preserving in numerous books and articles the maritime aspect of his country’s cultural heritage. He also made a fully researched biography of the first Kuwaiti historian, Abdul Aziz Al Rashid, traveling far and wide to Saudi Arabia, to Egypt, to Indonesia and to other places Abdul Aziz Al Rashid traveled seeking knowledge, where he worked and where he died.

Professor Yacoub Yousef Al Hajji was born in 1947, in a decade bristling with hopes and expectations heralded by the first shipment of crude oil from Kuwait in 1946.

Already from the early thirties, soon after the first Municipality’s Committee was formed in 1932, a group of volunteers from the elite merchant class set to establish the first stages of a civic administration in the country with priority on education, from which sprang the entire system of civil administration when Kuwait became an independent country in 1961.

Discovery

The discovery of a rich oil field in February 1938, at Burgan

spurred every effort in preparing the younger generation for the responsibility it was to assume in the near future; because if the new wealth was not combined with wisdom and far-sight in decision-making by all those involved in planning, it would not produce the desired results.

Far-sightedness is needed to further development, hence the endeavor of the pioneers who founded the Education department in 1936, in preparing promising young people in serving their country when the oil revenues would be pouring-in spurring innovations on an unprecedented scale.

The school curriculum was completely revised and expanded to provide a broader formal education; hence for the first time in Kuwait the fine arts and sports were included in the curriculum.

While groups of students were sent to Egypt to complete their higher education, more schools for both boys and girls were being built in the country faster than

teachers could be recruited from abroad, so the authorities encouraged high-school students to teach in them.

In this exciting atmosphere bristling with innovations, besides the enlighten home surrounding in which Yacoub was growing up made him keenly observant of what was going on around him,

Frugal

His mother was a typical lady of the frugal old days, amiable, hard-working, patient and loving.

His father, Yousef Jaseem Al Hajji, was a highly compassionate and humble man, who after working at the Ministry of Health for many years, steadily climbing the ladder of success by working hard and gaining knowledge and experience in his field, he became the undersecretary of the ministry he served so well.



Prof Yacoub Yousef

Subsequently he was appointed Minister of Al Awqaf and Islamic Affairs from which he retired in the seventies.

Happily married and the proud father of ten children, seven sons and three daughter, Yousef Jaseem Al Hajji nurtured them with love and direct example on the same noble principles of humanity and compassion on which he based his own life.

From the time Yousef was a young man his vocation and ultimate desire in life was to be able to help alleviate the pain and suffering of others.

Hence as soon as he retired from state government affairs, he dedicated the rest of his life in helping a suffering humanity through the charitable organization of which he was the chairman.

His endeavor was not only to carry out charitable deeds that helped to alleviate the suffering of people in entrenched poverty, his ultimate objective was to help the younger generation to start a new life through education and training.

Hence he provided for them schools, orphanages, training facilities and teachers that prepared them for a productive, dignified life.

Going on location to assess the conditions of those people, helping them to regain a grip on life with dignity and hope was a very demanding task, but to see a smile of hope on those people’s faces was for Yousef his greatest reward, his deepest satisfaction in life.

Nurtured by such a compassionate father, professor Yacoub Yousef Al Hajji and all his brothers and sisters grew up as real chips of the old block, each living his own life, but feeling for others with the same compassion and humanity as their father.

Responsibilities

As all children of his days Yacoub was trained from early childhood to assume some family responsibilities from an early age, but he was also allowed to play with other kids.

The absence of ready made toys spurred him to make his own things to play with; this enhanced his creativity and his propensity for solving problems.

His house was on the shore, hence swimming and fishing became his favorite pastime.

When he grew older, catching birds during their seasonal migration through the area spurred him to make a variety of traps for catching different species of birds; he also loved to engage in miniature boats for racing with other kids.

Making his boat from discarded oil tins to which he fixed a sail evoked in him the dream of becoming an engineer one day, but that never materialized. The sea exerted a special fascination on Yacoub, he loved to spend time on the shore playing with other children around the ships at the negaa, a basin in which a variety of ships and boats were at harbor.

Sometime he simply sat admiring the structure of those ships fascinated by the beautiful carving adorning the Bagla, a deep-sea sailing vessel.

Looking at those ships, especially at the majestic Boom-Safar, his mind often took wing on a voyage of fancy to distant lands, whose exotic beauty and luscious greenery as described by sailors in their stories created a vivid image in his mind, alluring him to sail always one day, to discover for himself the enchanting world beyond the horizon.

To be continued