

Book Review: *A Vision of Voices: John Crosby and The Santa Fe Opera*

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February issue | *Live/Out Loud* magazine | Santa Fe NM

The Santa Fe Opera, founded in 1957 by the late John Crosby, has impacted both the international opera world and the State of New Mexico in far greater scope than could have been imagined by anyone connected to the company when it presented its first season in 1957 to an audience of 480 seated on benches in the open air for a performance of *Madama Butterfly*. The story of the opera company and the visionary who served as Director General for 44 years is the subject of Craig A. Smith remarkable book, *"A Vision of Voices,"* published by the University of New Mexico Press in 2015.

A dedicated and tireless manager, with a limitless capacity for detail and full grasp of all aspects of the demands of his creation, John Crosby, almost singlehandedly, brought his vision to reality through the inspiration of others, a refusal to compromise in any aspect of the company's performance, and a zeal for American works and American singers that soon brought his creation to the attention of the musical world. Here are wonderful vignettes of the young New York conductor's appeal to his early supporters, including Santa Fe's Mirandi Levy, the great composer Igor Stravinsky, New Mexico legislators and politicians, and the somewhat bewildered community of Santa Fe, which, until Crosby's arrival, was largely unaware that an opera company was what the population 40,000 city needed in its future.

While Craig Smith obviously admires his subject, he is honest and balanced in his presentation of Crosby's skills as General Director and Conductor. Crosby's conducting often produced stinging reviews, but his obsession with the operas of Richard Strauss alone, gave the American public a rare opportunity to hear much of the composer's works and his courage in mounting new works, passed over by larger companies unwilling to take the risks involved, sealed the Santa Fe Opera's position as a premiere company. Taking both success and failure in stride, Crosby continued to mount risky projects "It wasn't to our credit that we produced these works. It was to the discredit of opera in the United States that they weren't being performed other places," Smith quotes. And this quote from Daniel Rice that many of the contemporary works were "horrible, absolutely horrible ... they stirred up interest. At least everybody would come and listen to it before they ran screaming into the night."

Embellished with a myriad of details, from the board room to backstage, Smith brings the reader into intimate contact with dozens of colorful personalities who inhabit the pages of this fascinating book. Tragedies (the 1967 fire, which destroyed the original theater and turned the Maestro's hair white; his father's dementia and death) and triumphs (the early and lasting relationship with Igor Stravinsky; the establishment of the apprentice program which became the model for opera companies throughout the United States) inevitably bring the reader to rooting for this genius, whom Smith portrays in all his human aspects.

"*A Vision of Voices*" is a wonderful book about an extraordinary man and a must read for anyone interested in music, culture, and the tremendous impact of one man who refused to lessen his standards, and convinced most of the operatic world that he was right. Meticulously researched and elegantly presented with many notes and illustrations, Smith's work properly puts John Crosby into the pantheon of other single-minded founders such as Wagner, Diaghilev, and Balanchine. Craig Smith is a masterful writer and he has done both The Santa Fe Opera and its founder proud.