

## MUSIC; Night at the Opera For the Price Of a Drink

By STEVEN MCELROY (NYT) 862 words

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IN the cramped back room of a dive in Brooklyn, a crowd of sweaty patrons are drinking and listening to live music. At the end of each song they explode in rowdy applause. Aside from the lack of cigarette smoke, which still seems odd even three years after the citywide ban in bars, it's an average evening for a music fan. Except that tonight is opera night.

Once a month at Freddy's in Park Slope opera singers and classical musicians perform where rockers and troubadours usually roam. The set list has included a steady flow of solos and duets from "Norma," "Otello" and "La Bohème" as well as instrumental selections from "Carmen" and "Porgy and Bess."

Opera on Tap, as the event is called, is a casual, freewheeling affair: the singers, usually in jeans and T-shirts, are known to hit wrong notes and maybe curse, laugh at themselves, apologize and start over. On some nights three women in Viking helmets and aviator sunglasses run around the room as they entertain the crowd with a severely truncated version of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries."

Despite the antics Opera on Tap has serious underpinnings. The performers are trained and experienced -- some have appeared with the New York City Opera or the Deutsche Oper Berlin -- but their careers are young, and most have nonsinging day jobs. For many of them the opportunities to perform arise mainly in pressure-filled environments -- rehearsals, lessons and auditions -- where fun isn't a priority. And no one gets up at karaoke to sing from "Don Giovanni." As David Gordon, a frequent participant in Opera on Tap, put it, "So rarely are we ever in control of the performance."

Anne Ricci, a lyric soprano and voice teacher, started the program a year ago while waiting at Freddy's one night to see a friend's band. When she lamented the lack of relaxed settings for opera singers, the bartender and entertainment booker, Donald O'Finn, suggested they try an opera night right there on the premises. She immediately pulled in Jessica Miller, a fellow alumna of the Manhattan School of Music, and Carla Roberts, a singer Ms. Ricci met while performing in an opera festival in Rome, and Opera on Tap was born in June 2005.

"Originally the idea was to give me and my friends the ability to work and find the spontaneity we need to make it good," Ms. Ricci said in a recent interview. But there have been other, unintended benefits of playing to a friendly crowd: she now includes arias in her audition repertory that she would not have dared to try in the past.

"I realized at Opera on Tap that all I had to do was stop worrying about them and enjoy singing them," she said. "The joy was the key element that was missing in my usual self-conscious interpretation."

It's not only the singers who feel more at ease in the casual atmosphere. "We believe that many Americans have never felt comfortable entering an opera house," the group's mission statement says. But Americans are pretty comfortable in bars, and the crowd at Freddy's reflects the differing cultures. At one table a group of graying men and women, some with their eyes closed, listen knowingly, and at the next a handful of 20-somethings are drinking beer and whistling in support of their performing friends. The mix seems to work: there's barely enough room for a reprise of the Wagner extravaganza, because the audience has doubled since the first night. The widening appeal doesn't surprise Meghan Dibble, who sang at Freddy's last month. "Opera is always put on a high pedestal," she said, "but really it's about sex and violence."

At the same show Catherine Greco, a first-time attendee, who came at the invitation of a friend, was taken with the performers. "I think they are tremendously talented," she said. Betsy Gross, whose son introduced her to the bar, dropped by one night about a year ago and has returned almost every month since. "I like the overall tone and atmosphere," she said, and the cost too. There's not even a cover charge. "It's just the price of a drink," Ms. Gross added.

The singers aren't alone in staging higher-brow entertainment in a bar: Rising Phoenix Rep recently presented an adaptation of Chekhov's "Three Sisters" at Jimmy's No. 43, a small East Village bar with a tiny performance space. But Opera on Tap is moving quickly beyond novelty. It's seeking to incorporate as a nonprofit educational organization, and it has already ventured beyond Freddy's, including a recent evening at Barbès, also in Park Slope. After the regular show on Thursday, Opera on Tap will make its Manhattan debut, at the Parkside Lounge on the Lower East Side, at the end of the month.

"I would like to see the event extend to other places," Ms. Ricci said. "There are bars everywhere."

OPERA ON TAP  
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Second Thursday of every month at 9 p.m., at Freddy's Bar & Backroom, 485 Dean Street, at Sixth Avenue, Park Slope, Brooklyn; (718) 622-7035. Also at the Parkside Lounge, 317 East Houston Street, Lower East Side, on Aug. 29; (212) 672-6270.

Photo: "Il Trovatore," perhaps, but no folk troubadours here: Opera on Tap performers, most of whom have nonsinging day jobs, at Barbès, a bar and performance space in Park Slope. (Photo by Robert Stolarik for The New York Times)