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Good Company

## An Opera Troupe Sings for Its Crudités

By Ruth La Ferla

On a recent spring evening, Audrey Babcock, a soprano with the Gotham Chamber Opera, stood propped against a wall in the home of Peter Duchin, the society bandleader, and his wife, the writer Brooke Hayward, reciting a tale of woe. Earlier that day, decked out in a floor-length skirt, a scoop-neck top and movie star shades, Ms. Babcock had boarded the M60 bus near her home in Harlem, bound for the Duchins' home in Lower Manhattan, where she had been asked to perform. She juggled a briefcase, a backpack, a handbag and a McDonald's milkshake, bracing for trouble as a busload of schoolchildren clambered aboard. "I actually thought right then how easy it would be for someone to walk off with my bag," she recalled.

Sure enough, someone did. And so it was that Ms. Babcock arrived at the party ("I had nowhere else to go," she said) without a cellphone, a house key or a dime to her name. "But this man was kind enough to loan me money, and I don't even know his name," she said, nodding gratefully in the direction of a man across the room who had lent her \$100 for the trip home.

It turned out that her Galahad was Mr. Duchin himself, who, with his wife, was holding a fund-raiser for the opera company at their curio-filled loft just off Park Avenue South. A musicale, it attracted culture-loving New Yorkers like Arie Kopelman, the president of Chanel, and Carolyne Roehm, the writer and ex-designer, who mingled with Neal Goren, the company's music director; Karen Lerner, the president of its board; and members of the company.

Mr. Duchin, whose father was Eddie Duchin, the legendary bandleader, and whose stepfather was Averell Harriman, told guests that in addition to helping the opera company, the party was intended to "give Brooke something to work on." Otherwise, he said, "she'll be finding something else to put on these walls."

If she can find the space. A compulsive collector, Mrs. Duchin has covered the loft in taxidermy, Greek- and Roman-style masks, Asian screens, Chinese lanterns and Murano lamps. A daughter of Margaret Sullavan, the actress, and Leland Hayward, the Hollywood agent and Broadway producer, she decorates the way she entertains, with haute Bohemian flair.

She is the first to acknowledge that some of her parties have been . . . well, outré. Most infamous perhaps was the one last Christmas in the Palazzo Brandolini on the Grand Canal. Some years earlier, Mrs. Duchin said, she had decided that "I'd better be present for my own funeral, to make sure it's done correctly." The party in Venice — "something of a dress rehearsal," she said, poker-faced — was enhanced by appropriately solemn music by Monteverdi and Vivaldi, and by inappropriately flamboyant garb, like the John Galliano cowgirl outfit and mink-trimmed boots worn by her co-host, Dodi Rosenkranz, whose Baroque apartment provided the setting.

Word of the party was leaked in advance to the press. “The Italian newspapers covered it for three days,” Mrs. Duchin recalled gleefully. “I think they expected me to make my entrance in a casket.”

The carnival ambience she created for the opera dinner carried over to the kitchen, where guests chattered, sipped Champagne and grazed, sampling strawberries, grapes and melon piled in pyramids on crystal serving platters. They were the trimmings in an otherwise down-to-earth menu of cucumber and watercress sandwiches, deviled eggs, Swedish meatballs and crudités.

“My fare never varies – it’s something I learned from Glenn Bernbaum,” Mrs. Duchin said, referring to the Mortimer’s owner, who died in 1998. “It’s simple, and people would rather have simple food.”

The repast was reflected in a half dozen ceiling-high mirrors, purchased from a Connecticut antiques dealer, and in relics of a circus sideshow. Later, they formed the backdrop for an evening of arias, some merry, some rending.

The scene later prompted Mr. Duchin to recall a highlight of his career.

“The greatest party that I have ever played was in Chicago,” he said. “I had gotten this call from a woman asking, ‘Would you like to bring your 14-piece band to the Palmer House?’ When I came down to the ballroom, there was only one table set up. I thought, It must be for cocktails.

“But at 7:30, two incredibly elegant people walked over to the piano. ‘We’ve been married for 50 years,’ they told me. ‘We have many friends, but we decided, if you don’t mind, we would just have the party for the two of us.’”