Singing on the Island

Bainbridge Light Opera Association this summer becomes ten years old . . . and it crowns its loudly-applauded decade with a full-scale production of The King and I.

By Myra Lenington

The KING and I, rich and royal in settings, lyrical and lavish in melody, will celebrate this season the tenth anniversary of the Bainbridge Light Opera Association. The company chose this brilliant show in its wish to present a "something wonderful" to mark its first decade.

In the summer of 1959 five cars had $120. This was the profit from a concert held for the benefit of BLOA. Well in the plot, "Down in the Valley," whipped up the previous spring just for a lark by a small group of Bainbridge musicians. The original discussion of where and why and when to do some such thing had included the suggestion of putting on the piece of the old Bainbridge Highchool drama-a theater under the stars sort of thing, the neighborhood guaranteeing a nightly crowd so that there was no necessity for early or late. This first show was fun for the performers and fun for their friends if determinedly modest in its aims.

That was the seat for today's Bainbridge Light Opera Association. Louise Mills, then a career girl with a passion for costumes, decided that Bainbridge should have a permanent opera association. She found that 1959 was too much too not to do anything with and that the residents had demonstrated their enthusiasm by turning out in droves to support the efforts. She convinced her friend Consie Berg, a professional musician at that time starting to raise a family, and she had the time to give to it. She talked her father, the late Colonel Marvin M. Dills, into being business manager, and that's the way it went. For years whenever something was needed it was Louise Mills who went after it and got it. Some people play cards on the ferry ride to Seattle, some read or just chat, but Louise spent her commuting time talking people into joining the Bainbridge Light Opera and recruiting reluctant mamas for the chorus.

Thus it was that in 1957 these people had stirred up enough interest to stage "House of Mirth" backed by a 22-piece orchestra provided by the Musicians' Union trust fund at the theater in what was then Port Ward. The contract to the show of the young man was written under the condition when not expected hundred or showed up, but over a thousand people clamored to get in. The fact that the show was free at night as a novelty possibly had a bearing, but in any case it was a thrill to the company. They crammed in about 900, made a profit, sat on seats buried in from the parking lot, but about 200 had to be turned away.

It was with this show, too, that the company's reputation for superiority in costuming began to grow. With a large population of Scandinavians and their descendants on Bainbridge, a committee set out to see what they could find in the way of costumes. By dint of much persuasion they were able to costume all the women in authentic gowns. Ever since this enthusiasm for excellence has driven the staff.

With a turn-away crowd as ample evidence of interest to encourage them, incorporated the fall as the Bainbridge Light Opera Association with four officers and six trustees elected from the membership. Colonel Mills was fond of pointing out that it was a good thing they were organized as a non-profit corporation because they always were. BLOA lives by grace of its patrons and sustaining members who contribute substantial sums of money as well as the give and work like people possessed.

In 1968 it was "The Merry Widow" again backed by a large orchestra, provided through a grant from the Music Performance Trust Funds administered by Local 73 of the Musicians' Union, "Brigadoon," and the second in North Kitsap High School at Poulsbo in 1959, is recalled by many people as their favorite. The trustees began to develop a theory of filled auditoriums and planned to alternate old and new as well as modest and elaborate; the latter idea is considered essential to keep the financial situation safe. Thus in 1969 the choice was "Naughty Marietta" again performed at Poulsbo. The next year they tried a new format, a review of selected shows and planned to alternate old and new.

From singers to managers to scholars—the company has included them all. Association officers try to cast their shows and make up a production staff with island and North Kitsap residents but occasionally they cannot meet a need up to their standards so they look to Seattle's re-

Lyman Black
Brigadoon.
This is the opening tavern scene from Yeas boiling King, which Reinbridge Light Opera Association put on two seasons ago.
sources for help. Among the professional singers who have sung leads are Gloria Galler and Maxine Wright, well-known sopranos who do live on the island. Jack Turner sang the baritone leads in "Brigan
dom and "Raimund" and they won the San Francisco Opera auditions and have
gone on to a career with them. Pat Pal
merton who regularly sings with the Opera on Wheels company, was a climax
Francis Villon and his brother: George,
normally a rock singer, assumed the role of a court
and the next may be back in the chorus.
To use "community" in another sense, as a
group of people in the community,
the company can also qualify. They
have outfitted Commodore Bain
bridge for production with about $5,000
worth of stage lighting. To be sure there
is a measure of self-interest in that this is
is the auditorium they usually play in, but
school productions certainly benefit, too.

Ten years is a remarkably long span for
to be in a single place to stay together.
There has to be an explanation for such
durability. Mrs. Knapp thinks it is that
from the beginning it has had sound fi
ancial management as well as artistic
excellence. The caliber of the man who
have served as officers and trustees over
years would certainly commend her cat.
James Hedges, retired industrialist, Lyman
Black Jr., clothing manufacturer; C. H.
Sutherland, longtime director of the Swed
ish Male Choir, now retired and living
in California; Charles Eihicker, attorney
and philanthropist; the late Colonel
Mills who was the archivist of the treas
ury for many years; Carl Berg, bank vice
president; Ben Bradford, former minister
of the Bellevue Congregational Church,
now of the Boeing Co.; Ed Villon, CPA,
and a vast assortment of other sensible
theater buffs ranging from housewives to
real estate company presidents.

Bainbridge Light Opera Association has been pretty
free of major conflicts and the Board of
Trustees has been very adaptable to
changing needs. They constantly review
the bidding, so to speak, to be sure they
are meeting the needs of the community
and those of the people involved with their
three or four productions a year. The most debated
question is, "Are we a group of amateurs play
ing for our own fun and games, or should we be making a certain point of hiring a lot of professionals to lend us?"
The answer is always a compromise.

The King and I, and I, will play Friday, Saturday and Sunday, June 17, 18, 19, 1956 in Com
modore Bainbridge Auditorium. It should
demonstrate the growth and strength of the Light Opera in that for the first time in
many years the cast and production staff are all from the Island, Pointe and
Bremerton. When Aurora Valentini re
signed last January as artistic director of the Board of Trustees was able to find
an island woman with the credits neces
sary to replace her. Ann Thomas studied
at the American Theater Wing School in
New York, acted in summer stock and has
been both student and instructor at the Petry Musical School in Steamboat
Springs, Colo.

Lyman Black Jr. will cap a series of
parts starting from chorus boy through
silly bits and comedy with the simpler
and dramatic roles of the King. Shirley Loonis
has an excellent reputation as an actress
and now it develops she can sing well too.
She will play the role of Anna. And every
10-year-old on the island wants to be part of
the children's chorus.

After The King and I, what? The Bain
bridge Light Opera Association plans to
step right out into the next decade with
their formula of good nature, sound
management and the best of productions.