

ChevronTexaco to Stop Sponsoring Met's Broadcasts

By Robin Pogrebin

May 21, 2003

ChevronTexaco announced yesterday that it would withdraw its support from the Metropolitan Opera's Saturday afternoon live radio broadcasts after the 2003-4 season, ending the longest continuous commercial sponsorship in broadcast history.

Joseph Volpe, general manager of the Met, said that he was determined to continue the broadcasts without ChevronTexaco and that he would look for a new sponsor.

Started on Christmas Day in 1931 with Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel," the Met matinee broadcasts have introduced opera to millions of people around the world.

Mr. Volpe said the broadcasts had been "the single most powerful audience development program in introducing opera to families" and had inspired opera stars. "Many of the singers today first discovered opera on the radio broadcasts," he said.

Patricia E. Yarrington, ChevronTexaco's vice president for public and government affairs, said in a statement, "As our business has evolved, we believe it is important to focus more of our resources directly with the countries and markets where we do business."

Beginning in 1940 Texaco was the sole sponsor of the broadcasts, which are now heard live from the Met stage at Lincoln Center 20 times a year on 360 stations at an annual cost of about \$7 million. Broadcast December through April, the broadcasts reach an estimated 10 million listeners in 42 countries.

Betty Allen, a former mezzo-soprano who is now president emerita of the Harlem School of the Arts, said she listened to the broadcasts growing up in Campbell, Ohio, a suburb of Youngstown.

"My neighbors were all Sicilian and Greek, and if you went up and down the street, you would hear the opera from everybody's windows," she said. "Everybody listened. It was the thing to do on Saturdays."

When the program was dropped by WCRB-FM in the Boston suburb of Waltham, the largest commercial classical music station in Massachusetts, the station manager received hate mail and threatening letters. The station does not carry the broadcasts.

Milton Cross was the show's announcer for more than 40 years, until his death in 1975, when Peter Allen took over.

The broadcasts are presented without commercial interruption, except for references to TexacoChevron in the commentary. During intermissions the programs occasionally offers an opera quiz, popular since the early days of the broadcast, when the quiz was called "The Opera Question Forum." Listeners send in questions each year in the hope of stumping a panel of opera experts.

Chevron bought Texaco for \$36 billion in 2000. While \$7 million may not seem like much to a major corporation, ChevronTexaco's decision comes at a time when the company has suffered financial problems. Last year the chief executive, David J. O'Reilly, took a 45 percent pay cut due to a decline in profits and the biggest drop in company shares in at least two decades.

The Met, too, has had a tough year and faces a nearly \$10 million deficit, attributed to the drop in foreign tourism.

"Of course I'm disappointed that they've decided not to continue," Mr. Volpe said. "However, I think it is an opportunity to develop a relationship with another company."

He said that one or two major corporations, which he declined to name, had expressed interest in backing the broadcast. If he is unable to secure such sponsorship by the time ChevronTexaco's support runs out, Mr. Volpe said, the show would still go on.

"One way or another, it will survive," he said. "Even if we have to appeal to the radio listeners themselves for support."

The matinee broadcasts grew out of financial difficulty. During the Depression the Met faced its first budget deficits and welcomed NBC's offer of \$120,000 to broadcast the season in 1931.

The 2003-4 live radio broadcast season is to start on Dec. 13 with the Met's new production of "La Juive," by Halévy, and is to conclude on April 24, 2004, with the broadcast of Wagner's "Götterdämmerung."

The relationship between ChevronTexaco and the Met will continue through the Early Notes program, which ChevronTexaco has endowed in perpetuity. That program, run by the Met and the New York City Department of Education, introduces opera to public school students.

ChevronTexaco also said it would donate to the Met the \$1 million worth of equipment used to broadcast performances.