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MUSIC: The European Community Youth Opera is launched

Placido Domingo and the European Cultural Commissioner preside over the launching.

For talented young singers hoping to make a career in opera, the European Community Youth Opera will offer a golden opportunity. The fact is that its future artistic director, Placido Domingo, sees the Youth Opera as both an excellent training ground and an exceptional springboard.

Auditions to be held in each of the 12 European Community countries will be open to singers under 30 years of age. The final selection will be made in Verona on 24 January 1989. Those selected will take part in a concert, to be given in the city's Philharmonic theatre and broadcast by Eurovision on the 6th of February. The full complement of 160 singers will make their operatic debut on 21 May 1989 at the Fenice theatre in Venice. They will be directed by Riccardo Chailly, in a production by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, to be broadcast by Eurovision.

The Youth Opera will enjoy the patronage of the European Commission and Parliament. They were represented at its launching in Brussels by the Cultural Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana, and Lady Elles, respectively. The Opera can be seen as a follow-up to the European Community Youth Orchestra, which has been winning plaudits since it was founded in 1976.

But it will include a much wider range of specializations, offering professional openings for not only soloists but also chorus singers, producers, costume and set designers, make-up people experts, technicians, etc.

Just as it was felt necessary to associate the Youth Orchestra with a musician of the first rank, Claudio Abbado, so it has been in the case of the Youth Opera. Both its standing and its success will be assured by the presence of Placido Domingo.

The European Community Youth Opera is being launched at a time when the lyric arts are finding favour once again, both in Europe and the world, especially among the young. Their popularity was underlined by Carlo Ripa di Meana, and it justifies the support the European Commission is giving the new project.

ENVIRONMENT: Small cars and large power stations are both a little "cleaner"

Two new Community regulations to reduce atmospheric pollution.

There is good news for both people and trees: in the 1990s both will be able to breathe more freely. Exhaust emissions will contain smaller quantities of nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons and the smoke from the chimneys of thermal power stations will contain less sulphur, responsible for acid rain.

The European Community's environment ministers adopted at the end of June a Community Directive limiting atmospheric pollution by large combustion plants and reached a common position on controlling exhaust emissions from small cars (below 1.4 litres), the only category to be excluded so far from the scope of Community regulations.

The Directive aims at reducing emissions of the two substances held responsible for acid rain, the nitrogen oxides and sulphur dioxide given off by power stations and other large installations burning high sulphur fuel and solid fuels. As the Directive covers all plants rated at 50MW or more, it will apply to some factories which generate their own electricity.

The reduction in the emission of pollutants into the air will take place in several stages. For existing plants the reduction in sulphur dioxide will take place in three stages: by 20% in relation to 1980 levels in 1993; then a total of 6mn. tonnes a year until 1998 and, finally, a further reduction, aimed at reducing in 2003 the totality of emissions in the Community to a little less than half their 1980 levels.

These reductions, even though they may appear limited, will mean heavy investments for the companies and bodies directly affected, a fact which led the environment ministers to provide a separate timetable for each country. Emissions of nitrogen oxides from existing plants will have to be reduced in two stages.

As for emissions from new plants, they must not exceed 20% of the emission for existing "normal" plants for sulphur dioxide and 50% for the nitrogen oxides.

As regards exhaust emissions, the ministers agreed to apply to cars below 1.4 litres the same standards as have already been set for cars between 1.4 and 2 litres. The reduction in the emission of pollutants will apply to new models as from 1992 and to all new vehicles in 1993.

AIR TRAVEL: Overcrowded skies

The Twelve turn their attention to a potentially dangerous situation.

The skies over the 12-nation European Community are becoming as overcrowded as their motorways on a Bank Holiday weekend. As a result, flights are being delayed, or simply cancelled; there are more near misses between aircraft approaching congested airports and passengers facing long delays are having a hard time keeping their tempers under control.

The crisis has taken both airlines and airports unawares. The fact is that air traffic was relatively stable between 1978 and 1986. It took off last year, when it shot up by 14%, a growth rate certain to be maintained this year. This explosive situation will not be easily defused, given that air traffic is expected to double in the next 10 years.

The Community's civil aviation managers are only too aware of the problem. They met in Paris in early June in order to deal with the most urgent aspect of it, the congestion forecast for this summer.

The Community's transport ministers were indirectly involved in the attempt to solve the problem, although control over air traffic is not one of the subjects covered by the EC Treaties. The British in fact did not conceal their surprise at the subject being raised in the Council.

This special meeting nevertheless allowed the Twelve to agree on action at Community level. A start is to be made with a detailed study of the future needs of air traffic control systems. It is already clear, however, that extra personnel is needed (it takes five years to train an air traffic controller), whose tasks must be redefined. Communication between the systems operated by the different Member States also leaves much to be desired. The Spanish and Italian systems are not linked to the British, French and German, for example.

The holiday season will only make the problem more acute: traffic is expected to go up by as much as 30% in some cases this summer. The Twelve envisage using some of the air corridors reserved for military aircraft for civilian flights.

Is the overcrowding the result of the deregulation of air travel, as some airlines maintain? Or is it possible to reconcile the interests of passengers with the safety of air transport? The Twelve will meet in Greece this autumn to seek an answer to this question. Meanwhile, fasten your seatbelts

TELECOMMUNICATIONS: Greater competition to provide services is on the way

But some telecommunications administrations will conserve certain monopoly positions.

The European Community Council of Ministers has decided to set up a Community-wide telecommunications network, to match the single European market, set for the end of 1992. The Council has also agreed to open up to competition the market for terminals equipment, including perhaps minitel and telefax machines. But the Community's telecommunications ministers, who were meeting on June 30 for the first formal Council devoted entirely to their sector, felt that a Community-wide telecommunications market could accommodate itself to the continued monopoly by certain telecommunications administrations of "basic services", to be defined later.

The target the ministers have set themselves is the creation of a Community-wide network, linking the 12 national networks as completely as possible, as well as a Community-wide telecommunications market, covering all services - except certain "basic" ones - and including public procurement for works and supplies. This last remains a national preserve so far, along with water, energy and transport.

To this end the Twelve want to arrive at a mutual recognition of national certification procedures for equipment in use in homes and offices. They also want to encourage the preparation of common technical standards, or standards which are compatible at the Community level, with the help of the projected European Telecommunications Standards Institute.

The ministers also favoured cooperation in the field of research and development. This is already taking place under the Community's RACE* programme, and should result in communications systems capable of high-speed data transmission. The ministers decided to expand the emerging high-speed bilateral telecommunication links into a Community-wide system of "electronic highways".

The June 30 Council agreed to the principle of a standard Europe-wide emergency call number. It also agreed that the EC should defend common positions at the World Administrative Telephone and Telegraph Conference (WATTC), to be held in Melbourne this December. The Conference is expected to define overall regulations for the world-wide development of the telecommunications sector.

* Research in Advanced Communications for Europe.

INTERNAL MARKET: Brighter prospects for the European crafts industry

The European Commission will help firms in the crafts industry to adapt.

The removal of the European Community's internal barriers will make a decisive contribution to growth in the Community. The completion of the single market should result in an increase of between 4.5 and 7% in the Community's GDP. This is the equivalent of an extra 1% in the annual growth rate and between two and five million additional new jobs.

Such developments are certain to benefit the European crafts industry, as the European Commissioner, Peter Schmidhuber, underlined in his speech to the Cologne Chamber of Crafts and the Research Institute for Vocational Training. The new economic area created by the completion of the single market, and the increased specialization it will give rise to, will provide craftsmen fresh opportunities, provided they can meet the market's new requirements.

The firms which are particularly affected are the small ones in the crafts industry which act as sub-contractors to large manufacturing companies. They probably will have to show greater mobility and make greater use of the possibilities offered by transborder cooperation.

The European Commission can help them in this field, according to Mr Schmidhuber, who noted that the Euro-Info-Centres and the Business Cooperation Network had been set up precisely in order to meet the needs of the crafts industry. The Commissioner pointed out that the existing Community regulations guarantee the free movement of the crafts.

His colleague, Commissioner Manuel Marín, reassured Mrs Gabriele Peus, a German Euro-MP, who had asked the European Commission what steps had been taken recently as regards the recognition of apprenticeship certificates. Mr Marín pointed out that, while the vocational training certificates in question are not yet regarded as equivalent, their practical comparability is recognized.

The Commission in fact has been engaged since 1986 in gradually implementing a Council decision of 1985 on the comparability of vocational training qualifications between Member States. It has achieved positive results in the case of 25 occupations, in such priority sectors as hotels and catering, vehicle repairs, construction, agriculture, electricity and textiles.

RESEARCH: The Twelve adopt five Community programmes

SCIENCE, DRIVE, DELTA, CBR and biotechnology get the green light.

Opportunities for European scientists and research workers to collaborate are multiplying, helped in part by funds provided by the European Community. The EC Council of Ministers formally adopted on June 29 five research programmes, to run for periods ranging from two to five years, at a total cost to the Community budget of ECU 326mn.+ The areas of research include improvements to road safety, the development of computers capable of learning and the assessment of the risks involved in the genetic manipulation of plants.

The SCIENCE* programme, which promotes exchanges of research workers within the Community, will receive the lion's share of the funds: ECU 167m. over 5 years. It will finance research projects and the twinning of laboratories in different Member States and provide grants to researchers to enable them to work in a Community country other than their own.

SCIENCE will also finance research already begun under the BRAIN neuro-informatic project. The aim is to develop data-processing systems based on the model of the human brain and capable of reasoning and learning. The programme will also fund research into superconductivity, which is expected to find important applications in transport and deep-sea and space exploration.

Other research programmes formally adopted by the Twelve last month include DRIVE** and DELTA***. Both are based on a formula the Community has already used very successfully in the field of information technology. Every DRIVE and DELTA project will involve at least two participants from different Community countries. At least one of the participants will have to be a commercial enterprise. Half the project costs will be met by the Community, with the participants - companies, universities, research institutes - meeting the rest.

By drawing on computer and telecommunication technologies, DRIVE hopes to make road traffic flow more smoothly and safely. The fact is that some 55,000 people are killed in road accidents in the 12-nation Community each year. Another 1.7mn. are injured, 150,000 of whom are handicapped for life. The cost of these accidents has been put at ECU 3 billion a year. Traffic jams are estimated to cost the Community another ECU 20 billion a year in lost time and petrol. Nor do the costs stop there. Exhaust gases add another ECU 5 to 10 billion to the bill each year as a result of increased environmental pollution.

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During three years European researchers, supported by ECU 60mn. from the Community, will devote themselves to pre-competitive and collaborative research. Among other things the research will aim at better analysis of traffic accident data; improved evaluation of road conditions and pollution; improvements to radar, traffic management and signalling systems. DRIVE also covers standardization, so as to ensure that national systems are compatible with each other.

Pre-competitive research under the DELTA programme will last two years and receive ECU 20mn. of Community funding. It will aim at harnessing information technology and telecommunications to the development of teaching methods suitable for retraining people as often as necessary during their working life. The research programme will cover word and image processing; new techniques of data storage; direct broadcasting by satellite; artificial intelligence, etc.

While testing the techniques aimed at helping workers either adapt to the new technologies or retrain, DELTA projects will pay particular importance to drawing up European standards which, if not common, are at least compatible.

Standardization is also at the centre of another research programme formally adopted on June 29. This is the Community Bureau of References (CBR) programme. Backed up by ECU 59.2mn. in Community funds, over a 5-year period, European research workers from the Community's industrial companies, scientific laboratories and universities will try to provide a scientific basis for its standardization policy. The fact is that, in order to have full confidence in the goods imported from other Member States, each of the 12 EC countries needs to rely on their testing laboratories and verification services.

The fifth programme adopted by the EC Council of Ministers is an amendment in fact, of the research and training programme in the field of biotechnology. The amount already allocated by the Community until the end of 1989 is being increased by ECU 20mn. This will (1) enable laboratories in Spain and Portugal to join the programme; (2) allow for a greater effort in the assessment of the risks such research involves and (3) enable researchers to process more of their data electronically.

+ 1 ECU = UK£ 0.65 or IR£0.78.

* Stimulation of the International Cooperation and Interchange Needed by European Research Scientists.

** Dedicated Road Infrastructure for Vehicle Safety in Europe.

*** Development of European Learning through Technological Advance.

ECONOMIC AND MONETARY UNION: The first stone of a Community Mint is laid in Hanover

Jacques Delors will head a committee made up of central bank governors, acting in a personal capacity.

A truly European currency could be in circulation sooner than you think. In other words, the day when you could use it to pay for your groceries is perhaps not so far off.

The British, and more especially their prime minister, Mrs. Thatcher, remain hostile to the very idea. But it is significant that she agreed at Hanover to the creation of a committee entrusted with the "task of studying and proposing concrete stages leading towards economic and monetary union".

The Committee, to be made up of the governors of the Community's 12 central banks and three personalities designated by the European Council itself, will be headed by the European Commission President, Jacques Delors. It must complete its work in time to allow the Community's finance and economic affairs ministers to look at its report before the Community summit in Madrid next June.

The Committee's conclusions should guide the European Council when it examines the means of achieving economic and monetary union at its Madrid session.

ENVIRONMENT: Safe to bathe in?

The quality of bathing water has improved considerably in the EC.

Some 44% of Britain's beaches met the European Community's standards on the microbiological quality of bathing water in 1986; in Ireland 6 of the 7 beaches met these standards.

This was also true of 61% of Italian beaches and 77% of Danish ones. However, as many as 97% of Dutch beaches met EC standards in 1986.

The European Commission's report on the quality of bathing water in the years 1983 to 1986 highlights both the progress made over this period and the work that remains to be done in some areas of the Community.

The 1976 Community Directive set limits to the level of microbiological pollution of bathing water. Member States had 10 years in which to meet these Community standards. However, none has yet fully met the goal set by the EC while some are still some distance from it.

Clearly, much cleaning up remains to be done.