

hypothetical future. Platonov's incubus is his feeling that his potential for greatness has rotted, unstimulated by his "godforsaken" "mudhole" of a relentlessly provincial town. Moscow as panacea is broached in the last scene, when it is waved before Platonov like a carrot by the wealthy widow Anna, who tries to regain him by offering to sponsor his settling there.

In accord with such a reading, Chekhov's first play becomes his creative self-justification for moving to Moscow. As Troyat's biography makes exceedingly clear, Chekhov's life always exhibited a remarkable wanderlust. While Troyat preserves Chekhov's reputation of appearing content and even self-effacing, his well-documented urge to be precisely where he wasn't belies some of his famous complexity and enigma. Even during his final months the tedium would overcome him, and he would make the long journey from Yalta to Moscow, despite his frail and failing condition.

The seeds for at least this aspect of his life were planted in his first dramatic fiction, through which he seemed to have exorcised his possible, provincial future. Bearing in mind that Chekhov was roughly 21 when he wrote the play, this notion of autobiographical projection appears confirmed when Platonov, 26, claims in the first scene, "I wonder you recognized me. The last five years have ravaged me like rats [at] a cheese. My life has not turned out as you might have supposed." Later he despairs of his situation further: "I shall be the same when I'm forty, the same when I'm fifty. I shan't change now. Not until I decline into shuffling old age, and stupefied indifference to everything outside my own body. A wasted life. Then death. And when I think of death I'm terrified."

In his response to the recent Broadway production, Frank Rich rhetorically asked, "Mr. Frayn picked the title 'Wild Honey' because of the play's hothouse erotic tensions, but where is the spark between Ms. Walker (or any of the women) and Mr. McKellen?" The play itself, like so many of Chekhov's later works, is essentially a treatise on boredom; and all of Platonov's halfhearted trysts with his "women" are to ward off the tedium they all share. In the midst of widow Anna's maneuvers, near the play's end, to win

back Platonov's affections, she learns that her stepson's wife is having an affair. With whom, she wonders, could it be? "There's no one in this miserable little place to be in love with! There's only the doctor. She's not in love with the doctor! There are only a few elderly landowners and a retired colonel and . . . oh, no!" A process of elimination instantly leads her to suspect Platonov, but she is so desperate to occupy her time that she will not permit anything to interfere with her own designs.

Such is the context and the subtext—conveying the boredom in the romance seems as integral a part of the play as it was of life. As Graham Greene observed in response to Tyrone Guthrie's 1941 production of *The Cherry Orchard*, "Chekhov's work is not young: it is as old as the strange land from which it emerged . . . twisted by sickness, boredom reels towards Yalta to die."

David Kaufman is a theater critic in New York City.

MUSIC

Meistersinger

by Dale Volberg Reed

Divo: Great Tenors, Baritones, and Basses Discuss Their Roles by Helena Matheopoulos, New York: Harper & Row; \$25.00.

To an opera lover, a guided excursion through the mysterious world of the opera singer is irresistibly appealing. Are opera singers merely brainless, egotistical voices? Do voice teachers and vocal techniques make a difference? How much do opera singers worry about acting, about musical interpretation of roles? Helena Matheopoulos, author of *Divo*, is an enthusiastic, generally competent guide, and the tour she provides is fascinating.

The organization is by vocal ranges, which provides continuity between chapters: We discover, for example, why Faust is an easy role for Nicolai Gedda and difficult for Alfredo Kraus; why the Duke of Mantua is a young

tenor's role but Radames is dangerous for a young voice; why, of 32 B-flats Radames sings, only one is really difficult; why singing Parsifal could make a tenor lose the voice for Rodolfo.

Rather than simply transcribe interviews, Matheopoulos has written a narrative about each singer, combining biographical material with lengthy quotations from the subjects as well as observations from other members of the operatic world. I am delighted to report that this is not a gossipy book. Biographical details are reported only when they are relevant to the singers' training and development.

Divo is not a "page turner" or even a "good read." It must be read slowly. Balancing reading with listening would help make abstract and possibly esoteric topics like vocal color and *tessitura* much more immediate. The author's turgid style does not make reading any easier. Often her clumsy sentences reflect fuzzy thinking. She would have been well served by a stringent copy editor, who could also have caught her occasional inexcusable errors in musical terminology.

Divo is graced by a small selection of excellent photographs, all but one showing the singers performing roles they discuss in the book. The one priceless exception is a photograph of Pavarotti dressed for a costume party as a sheik, with shades.

This is a serious, honest book about dedicated men at the top of their profession. They are clearly—sometimes surprisingly—intelligent and thoughtful, often highly articulate, and impressively hardworking. The book offers an admirable antidote to many old stereotypes (though a music lover serious enough to read this book already knows the stereotypes are false).

Divo will inevitably find its audience. Real opera fans will relish its revelations and forgive its flaws. General readers, if they can tolerate a certain amount of obscurity (chiefly unelaborated references to roles, operas, or composers) may be interested in this intimate view of genuine craftsmen at work. Excellence in almost any field exerts a fascination of its own.

Dale Volberg Reed is a piano teacher, an amateur harpsichordist, and a choir singer.

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