

MARC BLITZSTEIN'S ALBUM

"No For An Answer" finds permanence in its recording. The composer's stature as a craftsman. . . . The movies and theater. . . . "An audience of 40,000,000 children. . . ."

KEYNOTE Recordings have just issued an album of excerpts from Marc Blitzstein's *No For An Answer*. This remarkable opera made a deep impression last winter on the relatively small audience which saw it; it was one of the misfortunes of theater and musical history that no commercial producer would undertake to give it a wider hearing. For that reason alone these records are welcome.

The album includes music from the opening chorus, the soliloquy on the joys of "Penny Candy," the theme song, as well as the take-off on the Torch Singers, the haunting fox-trot known as "Secret Singing," the love scene between Joe and Francie, three vivid character sketches, plus "The Purest Kind of Guy." Chorus and cast are from the original company, with the exception of Joe, whose role has been taken by Michael Loring. The performance on wax reaches the same high levels as the three Sunday night performances at Mecca Temple. Except for some of the words in the choral section, which are hard to catch, the reproduction is clear. A booklet, supplied with the album, overcomes this difficulty.

I am impressed, listening to this music again and again, with Mr. Blitzstein's stature as a craftsman. More than that, he is a devastating satirist, a brilliant lyricist, dramatist, and composer all in one. These abilities represent a rare combination for one man; its results are projected with impressive power. To me, the final test lies in the audience-reaction. I recall two years of my own experience with a non-professional dramatic group which gave several dozen presentations of Mr. Blitzstein's *Cradle Will Rock* to every sort of audience. Invariably, that opera's cumulative impact was enough, in terms of applause, to tear the roof off.

Since its beginnings in the seventeenth century, the opera has attempted a marriage of all the arts: music, theater, poetry, dance, and even painting. More often than not, this attempt was ill-starred. The Italian operas of the last century considered librettos as a necessary evil, vehicles to bear all the more important arias. Taken by themselves, they were a ridiculous hodge-podge of language with little relation to the music. More and more, composers tried to achieve a greater unity of the various art forms. Weber and Liszt made important strides in this direction by writing their music to fit dramatic events on the stage. It was Wagner who went further than others, establishing a more significant relationship between the characters of the opera, the music, poetry, and supplementary dramatic effects. This made for continuity, for an organic unity

which the opera had never previously enjoyed. Whatever one may think of the Wagnerian libretto, and it must be judged in its historical context, at least it bears an inseparable relation with its music.

Blitzstein has retained this vital aspect of the opera. But there are important differences. Wagner, it will be remembered, was part of his times, a period loosely described as "romantic." It was the era of the individual, when the thriving industrial classes of the nineteenth century inscribed on their banner the rights of the individual man. The bourgeois meant his own rights primarily, the rights of his class. But the creative artist expanded the concept to include the personal and human rights of every individual. Writings were concerned with the torment and striving to realize the dream of an ideal person. Siegfried, for example, is the perfect youth, flawless in body and mind. This preoccupation with the ideal resulted in an abstraction of characters: gods, devils, symbols, but never real people, with Moussorgsky the exception to the rule. Marc Blitzstein, on the other hand, deals with earthy folk, with real people, for he understands the relation of the individual to the collective. For this, new musical approaches were necessary. Wagner's music is continuous, and no lines are ever spoken. But such a technique becomes a real barrier to realism in style, and in the last decades, composers in our country and abroad have sought a natural fluidity between music and the spoken libretto. Blitzstein is perhaps the first to achieve real success in this effort. In the love scene between Joe and Francie, the latter does not sing at all, but speaks her lines in an easy conversational manner while Joe responds with a single, reiterated musical phrase. This interplay of music and dialogue brings out all the psychological nuances of the characterizations, quite impossible to achieve with the earlier musical techniques.

Blitzstein's musical sources are as manifold as his resources. He employs jazz frankly, as in "Fraught." He uses vaudeville tunes as in "Dimples." He handles the "blues" and the barbershop harmonies, without cramping his use of the most advanced musical formulas of our time. Rhythmically, he is extraordinarily flexible, as in "Make the Heart Be Stone." Harmonically, his structure is logical as it is original. Though never easy, his melodies are haunting, and deeply expressive, as in "Opening Chorus" and "Secret Singing."

All this notwithstanding, the net result might have been mediocre. But the gifted author of *No For An Answer* has expressed living struggle with rich, human characters.

His is a fervent music that glows with unrivalled power, dignity, and affirmation. It is music which springs from the lives of little people "whose steady onward flow insists on taking place insists like time and space."

LOU COOPER.

Children's Theater

The USSR's juvenile playgoers demand, and get, good drama.

Moscow.

AN AUDIENCE of 40,000,000 is the public for children's theaters in the Soviet Union. The first of these theaters was founded twenty years ago—a short period for the development of a new field of art. At least, however, when they first appeared they had the advantage of being untrammelled by tradition. To be sure, there were occasional performances for children in various cities and districts in Russia even before the Revolution. Generally these little plays were based on some favorite fairy tale. The stories were usually turned over for dramatization to playwrights none too talented or able. They were performed by actors who lacked sufficient ability to make a place for themselves in adult theater, and produced by directors who considered the whole thing a routine and dull assignment.

In the Soviet Union now the children's theaters are approached with an entirely different attitude. From the first, they were considered important both educationally and artistically. And during the first twenty years of experiment and hard thought, though there have been many setbacks, the experience has been invaluable. Today, a considerable number of productions for the children's theater are equal in quality and conception to the best in adult theater.

To begin with, children are an appreciative and responsive audience. They learn easily through the theater—which makes it all the more imperative that plays produced for them have content that is meaningful. The task of the theater is to mold the taste of the children, to cultivate their artistic appreciation, to sharpen their sensitivity to the poetic, to attune their ear to the best in music, to train their eye for pictorial beauty. The theater can do much in stimulating children's imagination, giving them new impetus for creative activity in every walk of life.

The first requisite in launching such a theater was to create a literature for it. There are a multitude of themes other than fairy

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tales that are important. But in general playwrights and authors showed little interest in the problem. Unduly frightened by the need for instructive material in play form, they misunderstood the possibilities of juvenile drama. The result was that most of the material was written by educators who may have had an excellent grasp of their subject, but who were not necessarily skilful in translating it into a form that would act well. The plays produced were better than nothing, but their artistic merit was certainly open to question. It was quite a while before the understanding became widespread that only art of excellence can exert significant educational influence. This was the first lesson of twenty years' work.

To underestimate the importance of the juvenile playgoer was a serious mistake. For a time the idea obtained that children's theaters could get away with more primitive productions, with over-simplified ideas and child characters cluttering up the stage. Today, however, the language of the juvenile stage is simple but not condescending, approaching the special audience in much the same way as the best plays approach adult audiences.

The differences between children's theater and the "grown-up" stage are confined to themes and content. There is no difference in treatment. Many children's theaters in the Soviet Union have staged productions that depict the world as it actually is, without gloss or falsification. Such productions stimulate thought and promote the mental and spiritual growth of the youthful audience.

Furthermore, though the characters presented in the children's theater are not the same as those in the adult theater, they are nevertheless acted in the same manner. Children have a very critical attitude. For example, an actress often plays a boy's role, but she had better be good, or the children will remain unconvinced and unsatisfied with the play. The depiction of child parts requires artistry, long experience, and a knowledge of the child's world. Nor should it be forgotten that the child's world changes from generation to generation, often at a rapid pace. It is necessary to have constant contact with the juvenile audience to understand the outlook and attitudes that must be considered in the theater. That is another important lesson gained in the twenty years.

Mention too should be made of repertoire. Dramatists producing largely for children's theater must be urged to depict characters taken not only from the near or distant past, but also—and perhaps to a greater extent than heretofore—from present-day life. A dearth of juvenile plays dealing with contemporary Soviet events has raised the demands for new writing, for comedies, and even musical plays.

Numerous problems of the children's theater are still unsolved, but the essential points have been settled. The most encouraging development in the Soviet Union has been the production of a good many plays of permanent artistic value.

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