

was, to say the least, tepid, while *Grapes of Wrath*, which they're re-issuing now, was one of the year's three biggest money makers. The comparison is symptomatic; the audience which wants *Grapes of Wrath*, is not going to swallow jingopap without gagging. Also, the phony attitude with which Hollywood approaches South America is actively resented by the nations to the South. The Argentine ban on *Down Argentine Way* is a case in point. Importing gaucho technical advisers is not going to help. It's not only Americans who know what they want, then, and if any further proof is needed, note this from the *Hollywood Reporter*: "The Great Dictator broke all records in Mexican screen history on its opening day at the Chino Theater, its first day's take equalling the week's gross of eight out of ten pictures shown in Mexico City."

The lessons for Hollywood are obvious; and if the producers can't learn, it will be up to the people—not only of this country, but of the South American nations and the world—to teach them. And the first thing to be taught will be that the unfailing device for pulling out of an impasse is to cut to the people.

HOWARD P. RYAN.

## Blitzstein's Music

A summing up of the tunes in "No for an Answer."

MARC BLITZSTEIN'S *No for an Answer* is an opera only in the sense that the dramatic action and music form a continuous thread, supplementing, and reacting on each other. The structure could not exist without the music. On the other hand, the music does not interfere with the development of the play, as is too often the case in conventional opera. The motion of the story flows from the music but never permits the music to place artificial barriers in its path. Wherever necessary the music is withdrawn. Further, none of the characters sings in accepted operatic style. The cast is basically acting to music. The countless transitions from music to colloquial speech and back again serve the purpose of keeping the entire action moving. In this sense it can be considered a play in music. Actually, what Mr. Blitzstein has evolved is neither an opera nor a play, but a new style containing the elements of both forms. He has combined these into an exciting hybrid which will most certainly some day be formally baptized and named.

Some of these elements have been used before. The "number" form employed in *No for an Answer* can be traced back to the operas of Mozart and Weber and is found in the modern operettas of Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler. This form as used by these composers called for a straight dramatic text followed by a musical number, either an aria or a group number. The alternation was generally obvious and stilted. Blitzstein has taken over



COMPOSITION WITH TWO PARROTS is a new mural by Fernand Leger, one of the most important of French modern painters. The work, 13 feet high, 15 feet 8 inches wide, and typical of his semi-abstract painting, is on exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. It was painted during the years 1935-39. The artist is now in New York.

this technique and by utilizing it in a completely individual manner has developed it to an infinitely higher stage. In both *The Cradle Will Rock* and *No for an Answer* there are no lines of demarcation between dialogue, musical numbers, solos, etc. Each of these elements is injected, dropped, reintroduced in a fluid interplay. When Gina in *No for an Answer* pathetically scolds Mery for having a baby you are hardly conscious of the transition from music to speech. You may not notice the music as a separate entity because you are too occupied with what Gina is saying. But the impact and power that the weaving music injects into the spoken lines leave the listener limp. Another example of Blitzstein's musical talent is the love scene between Joe and Francie. Here ordinary dialogue spoken by Francie is alternated with a repeated musical phrase, "Francie, Ah, Ah, Ah," sung by Joe. This phrase sung over and over again with significant inflections contains a remarkably poignant expression of love.

The music in *Cradle* fitted like the proverbial glove. *No for an Answer* involving a much more complex structure, more intricate human relationships, and characterizations requires a corresponding music. Consequently the choral writing is vastly expanded over *Cradle*, the groupings are more variegated and the relation of these groups to individuals is more subtle. There is, however, the same generous borrowing of typical American musical materials. Jazz, blues, vaudeville sequences, and barber shop harmonies find their way into a

superb take-off on a torch singer, a mock sentimental "ballad" of penny candy and a three-way satire on hamburgers, capitalism, and a lost shoe. There is also the hauntingly beautiful melody line that comes in the quieter, more reflective sections. "In the Still, Still Night" is one of the finest fox-trot melodies I have ever encountered and Clara's song, "In the Clear," shows that Blitzstein has lost none of his expressive powers as a melodist.

A further strong point in favor of the versatile Mr. Blitzstein is his ability to place his advanced harmonies, difficult rhythms, and unconventional melodic line into a mold simple enough for the broadest audiences to grasp. This is a tremendous achievement, and something all serious composers would do well to emulate.

Aside from academic and technical considerations, much of the source of Blitzstein's musical power is derived from the characters and subjects he deals with. Certainly his genuine and contagious affection for Chuck, Nick, Joe, and all the members of the Diogenes Club plays an important role in influencing the direction and nature of his music. The comradeship in "The Purest Kind of a Guy," the gayety of "Workers, Do Your Homework," the ominous power of "Did They Think They Could Get Away With That?" or the dignity and sweep of the final chorus can only be the product of an artist whose eloquence and strength stem from the people.

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about whether this country will ever produce a composer of major proportions, let them stop worrying, for right in their midst is the brilliant and immensely endowed Marc Blitzstein.

#### LEAGUE OF COMPOSERS CONCERT

You rarely hear anyone mention, "*Les Six*" any more. But about 1922 the entire music world was agog about a group of six French composers who sardonically violated every accepted precept of music. These *enfants terribles* labored under the motto "Shock the bourgeoisie," and in the main succeeded. Their attitude derived from the atmosphere of post-war disillusionment in which cynicism and novelty flourished. This group regarded "great ideals" with deep disdain and claimed only ordinary things were worth while. Their definition of ordinary was very flexible and could extend to writing about bar rooms or vacuum cleaners. To these composers the grandiloquent music of the romanticists and the abstractions of the Debussy impressionists were identified with the smug middle-class audience whom they disliked intensely. The spearhead of this group, Darius Milhaud, wrote such items as "An Oxen on the Roof," and a song cycle which utilized a mail order catalogue for its subject matter. Nevertheless, his music possessed a certain rude, rugged strength, both appealing and skillful. "*La Creation Du Monde*"; "*Soldades de Brazil*" (written after a visit to Brazil); "*Poemes Juifs*," and the opera "Christophe Colomb" were compositions that succeeded in establishing Milhaud as a prominent musical figure. During the Popular Front period, he associated himself with progressive trends. He wrote music for important films and composed a piece called "Death of a Tyrant."

It was therefore with great eagerness that many of us looked forward to the concert sponsored by the League of Composers at the Museum of Modern Art where an entire evening was devoted to the more recent of Milhaud compositions. Eagerness was soon transformed into keen disappointment when it became clear as the evening unfolded that Milhaud was slipping backward. Here was music that was hardly shocking, but on the contrary was mild and repetitious. I doubt whether it would offend even the most conservative listener. "*Le Voyage D'Ete*" (1940) was a song cycle written to an insipid text. Floating, vague, and dull, it sounded like a lifeless shadow of Debussy. Just as flat was "*La Cantate de l'enfant et de la Mere*" (1938), which employed the services of a *diseuse*, a string quartet, and a piano. Again the text covered such a trivial subject that it would have been ridiculous to attach music of any import to it. And none ever came! The bulk of the evening's music was of a similar caliber except for two vigorous excerpts from "Christophe Colomb" and some fine piano pieces played by the composer at the tail end of the program.

Milhaud is unquestionably a gifted composer. As a reaction from the days when he