

# The Musical Bookshelf

**MAKERS OF OPERA**, by Kathleen O'Donnell Hoover. Bittner. \$7.50. Musicology, which is usually short for musical pedantry, puts its best foot forward in a work of this fastidious quality. Mrs. Hoover, by concerning herself primarily with objective historic facts rather than subjective critical opinions, has clearly entered the musicological domain. But contrary to general practice, she places this science at the service of a discriminating intellect, one which still entertains genuine esthetic enthusiasms. Since she also writes with urbanity and a trenchant style, the results are as entertaining as they are edifying.

"Makers of Opera," a book designed and printed with rare elegance, contains eighteen essays on operatic composers ranging from Jacopo Peri to Richard Strauss. The author concentrates on the genesis of operatic works, describing a composer's relation to his librettist, comparing initial jottings and first drafts with final revisions, describing contemporary critical reception. She shows us not only how but also why a composer's style evolved as it did. Along the way one picks up a variety of information, all of it pertinent and meaningful. With masterful skill, Mrs. Hoover avoids the cliché both of fact and expression. She writes well, and never with condescension. A nimble allusion here, a trenchant comparison there affirm her genial culture. The author's knowledge, in short, is assimilated, not flaunted.

Take the essay on Meyerbeer as a case in point. In a few deft paragraphs Mrs. Hoover sketches the sociological and artistic circumstances which pro-

duced Parisian grand opera, better termed "grandiloquent opera." Meyerbeer, the supreme exponent of this musical species, comes off rather better here than is currently fashionable. He is shown to have been a composer of considerable originality, but one who has become a scapegoat for the sins of the nineteenth century. Reading the author's appraisal of "L'Africaine," one is tempted to ask for a revival of this now maledict spectacle.

Not the least attractive aspect of "Makers of Opera" is the concluding set of illustrations. Like the literary portions, this section sedulously shuns the commonplace. There is a lovely self-portrait of Weber, a noble painting of Verdi. Among the fascinating reproductions of stage sets one is struck by the gaudy, neo-Oriental splendor of Schinkel's design for "Fernand Cortez" (by Spontini), also by the delicacy and felicity of Platzner's design for the original production of "Don Giovanni."

A rich, eminently civilized book! One awaits with impatience Mrs. Hoover's further investigations in the uncharted field of twentieth-century opera.

**BRAHMS**, by Ralph Hill. Wyn. \$1.50. This and the two titles following belong to a series called "Great Musicians." In scope these books stand midway between encyclopedia articles and full-size biographies. Their aim being predominantly historical rather than analytical or critical, they serve more to whet the reader's appetite than to present a comprehensive view of the composer and his music. The volumes,

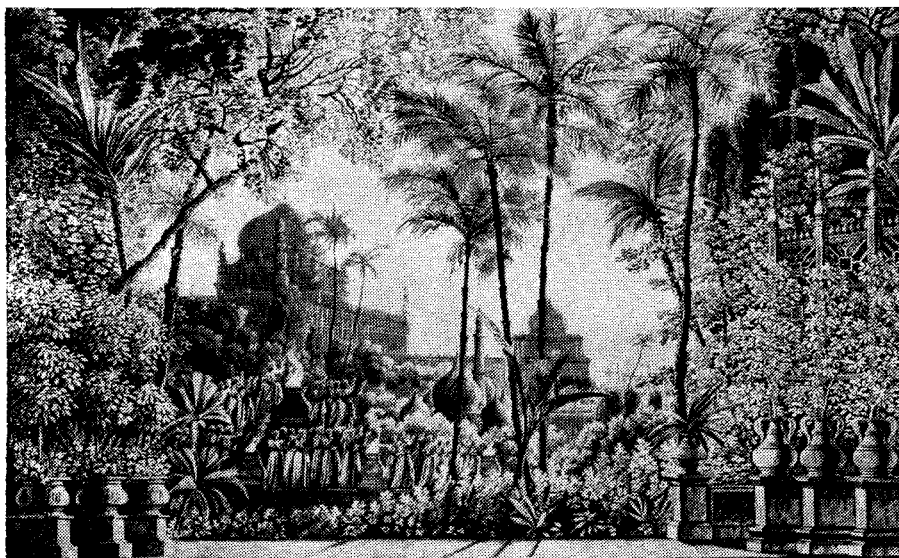
of British manufacture as well as authorship, are small in size, attractive in appearance. They are well adapted to the needs of the casual listener who is concerned more with general information than exhaustive scholarship. Further titles in this series will be reviewed in coming issues.

From a purely factual standpoint Mr. Hill's short biography is an adequate survey of Brahms's life. What lacks is an entirely objective approach either to the man or his music. The unpleasant aspects of the Brahmsian personality (his well-documented boorishness, his egocentric behavior) are glossed over as choleric misinterpretations, while criticisms of Brahms's music impress the author as nothing more than "rather puny efforts to discover weaknesses." Such adulatory presentation is, unfortunately, graced by little in the way of searching insight or an especially engaging literary style.

**BEETHOVEN**, by Alan Pryce-Jones. Wyn. \$1.50. A contradictory personality does well to receive an ambiguous interpretation. Beethoven's character defies classification, a fact which the author wisely acknowledges by confining his biography to a setting forth of evidence. His comments are perceptive questionings rather than dogmatic assertions. Mr. Pryce-Jones aims to enlighten rather than convince, and this he does, though in the complicated process of compressing fifty-seven years into 115 pages much important, if not absolutely essential, data falls by the wayside.

**HANDEL**, by Edward J. Dent. Wyn. \$1.50. E. J. Dent's life of Handel is the most successful of these short biographies. For one thing, the paucity of information about Handel makes brevity less irksome. For another, the learned author's grasp of fact, the impressive way in which he marshals and analyzes information, gives a reader the comforting impression of authority. Still, one cannot help but wish that space had been available for further divagations into the eighteenth-century background and for more in the way of critical appraisal by this sensitive and knowing writer.

—ROLAND GELATT.



—From "Makers of Opera."

"... the gaudy neo-Oriental splendor of Schinkel's design for 'Fernand Cortez'."

## ADDITIONAL REVIEWS

on page 34

MOZART'S SYMPHONIES, by Georges de Saint-Foix.

CHOPIN, by Herbert Weinstock.

JAZZ: A PEOPLE'S MUSIC, by Sidney Finkelstein.

# THE YOUNGER SET



**A** SOUND formula for obtaining good music is: get a good composer to write it—a precept which Young People's Records have followed with admirable results in their new version of "The Emperor's Clothes." Douglas Moore, one of the pioneers of this enterprise, has taken his commission with the care it merits and produced a score which young people can listen to with pleasure, quite unaware of the fact that they are being musically uplifted at the same time.

Raymond Abraskin, who made the adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen story, has contributed lively lyrics which prompted Moore to music of gaiety, action, and a flavor of fantasy. Remote as the source of the story would seem from today, the adapters have given it a contemporary touch that is not at all unwelcome. An excellent cast includes George Rasely (Emperor), Leonard Stokes (Prime Minister), Earl Rogers (First Tailor), James Ballister (Second Tailor), and the Gene Lowell Chorus. Not only are they all possessed of pleasant singing voices, they enunciate the text clearly, under Max Goberman's expert direction. (YPR, 1006-7, \$2.78, unbreakable.)

From the same source, but of a different character, is "Licorice Stick," an entertaining and informative survey of the clarinet, in word and musical illustration. It embraces both the classical and popular usage of the instrument, showing the wide variety of effects possible with it—"sad, lively, or just cozy"—by means of excerpts from Mozart's celebrated Quintet, the Fifth Symphony of Tchaikovsky, and a jam session. (YPR, 420, \$1.39, unbreakable.)

"Allegro" is the trade name of a comparative newcomer in the children's field which has some offerings worthy of investigation. "William Tell," for example, is "a heroic story with music" about men who loved freedom and justice (Allegro Jr., 17, 99¢). The story material is engagingly narrated by Crane Calder, and Rossini's overture to "William Tell" is the appropriate background music. For a slightly older age group there is a selection of songs from "Pinafore" (Allegro, Intermediate 55, \$1.25, unbreakable) performed by the Little Opera Group with piano accompaniment. The excerpts include "We Sail the Ocean Blue," "Little Buttercup,"

"Never Mind the Why or Wherefore," "When I Was a Lad," and "He Is an Englishman." Then there is "Alice in Wonderland" with the "Jabberwocky" and "Soup" songs attractively sung by Crane Calder. The settings are by Suzanne Bloch, who also plays the lute accompaniments. (Allegro, Intermediate 56, \$1.25, unbreakable). Attractive jackets are an added feature of Allegro's issues.

Of interest to the nursery set are the products of Karousel, another company whose products have not come our way before. They specialize in participation records, which offer the young listeners a chance to become young performers. Each song is repeated twice, with key words omitted the second time, to be filled in by the child. However, the tunes are hummed straight through by the "Smoothie's" trio, thereby sustaining the rhythmic pattern and facilitating the child's participation. Among the titles are "Sing a Song of Boys," "Sing a Song of Girls" (TC 6), "Songs About Kittens" (TC 4), "Songs of Mother Goose" (TC 1), and "Sing a Song of Animals" (TC 2). TC might conceivably stand for Ted Cott, who organized and produced this intelligent effort. All of Karousel's records are priced at 79¢.

In the "Cub" series, sponsored for very young children by Folkways Records, are "Race You Down the Mountain" and "The Merry Go Round" (C 6) sung by Woody Guthrie with guitar and harmonica, "Little Bird You Love" and "Loopity-Lou" (C 5) sung by Adelaide Van Wey with zither, and "Swimmy Swim" and "Grow Grow Grow" (C 4) by Guthrie with drum accompaniment. The last of these is most successful.

In the story department this month we have "The Cuckoo who Lived in a Clock" (Columbia MJV 50), in which the amusing bird calls of Donald Bain are more entertaining than the narrative by Gene Kelly; "Who Blew that Whistle?" (YPR, \$1.39, unbreakable), a story of Officer Chubby's experience with a whistle that wants to be a traffic cop, and "The Sitter Who Sat" (Allegro Jr., 18, 99¢, unbreakable), graciously told by Florence and Crane Calder. "The Funniest Story in the World," with Groucho Marx is, in prospect, exciting; but the gifted Groucho's material is too weak for him to do much with (YPR 179, \$1.39, unbreakable). —MARIE L. MUTCH.

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