

# Music to My Ears

## THE MET OPENS WITH "FORZA"—MILHAUD BY MITROPOULOS

**T**O say of the opening performance at the Metropolitan Opera this season of Verdi's "La Forza del Destino" that it was handsomely designed, beautifully sung, intelligently if not perfectly staged, but that some indefinable something was absent, is merely to show how far one's expectations of this theatre have come in the two years plus in which Rudolf Bing has been at work there. Not too long ago such scenery as Eugene Berman's would have been, of itself, a cause for rejoicing; now we are inclined to take it for granted, saying: "What else?"

In choosing, for the third consecutive year, a work of Verdi as his opening new production, Bing deviated from the bold stroke of "Don Carlo" (an unfamiliar work which is very close to a masterpiece) and the solid convention of "Aida" (a familiar work and undoubtedly a masterpiece) to something on a middle ground between the unfamiliar and the familiar. Like "La Gioconda" (which will come along later), "Forza" is a work which is constantly revived but rarely brought to life. In each, a tedious story winds in and around much beautiful music; in each, stock characters vie for attention with people of blood and muscle. At best, however, "Forza" is Verdi, not Ponchielli; at worst, "Forza" is conventional, never commonplace.

But it is assuredly, in staging "Forza," a problem of supplementing what Verdi provided, not merely realizing what he accomplished (as in "Otello" or "Falstaff," "Rigoletto" or "Don Carlo"). Supplementing may take the form of adding interest by taking away something in the score which is intrusive; and that has been done in this version by omitting the Inn Scene entirely, joining the episode of the accidental murder to its consequences in Leonora's penitence. Dramatically, little is lost; and if the lively music of the Inn Scene must be missed, there are continuity and compactness to be reckoned with as gains.

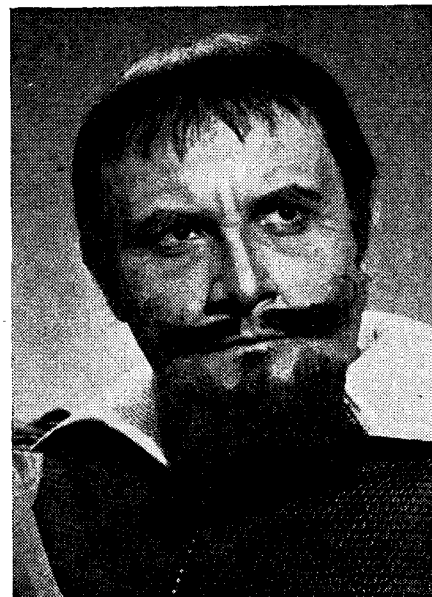
So much of the best music was magnificently sung by a singularly well-voiced (in the piano-tuning sense) quartet of Zinka Milanov (Leonora), Richard Tucker (Alvaro), Leonard Warren (Don Carlo), and Cesare Siepi (the Abbot) that the poorer music for Father Melitone was especially conspicuous in the weakish work of Gerhard Pechner. Those who recall the rolling sound and the apt characterization that Ezio Pinza once provided

for this part could not but wince at Pechner's conversion of eccentricity into grotesquerie. For that matter, the reduction in the part of Preziosilla by the elimination of the Inn Scene just about brought it down to the capacities of Mildred Miller, an intelligent artist but no such virtuosa as Verdi had in mind for this relatively minor part.

Compared with the wholly integrated action Margaret Webster provided for "Don Carlo" or the same lady's fresh approach to "Aida," Herbert Graf's animation of an admittedly difficult problem was no more than acceptable. If the maximum of lurching and breast-beating was discouraged, there was an uncomfortable amount of tediously conventional business in the ensemble action which, unfortunately, coincided with the weakest music in the score.

Berman's choice of a century earlier than the one specified in the action in order to have a richer style in which to work cannot be seriously disputed; but I found his tendency to emphasize the pictorial rather than the dramatic even more disturbing than in "Rigoletto." Of itself, the Convent Scene is imposing; but it is far from the modest structure perched on a hillside that Verdi imagined. The last tableau, in the grotto, had not even good looks to commend it, and it was marred by a rock cluster in mid-stage that blocked the view of those seated to either side. The exterior for the battle scene was truly outstanding, the opening interior also first class. Soon enough, no doubt, it will have the weather-beaten quality asked for by the text, which it presently lacks. The costuming throughout was always imaginative and sometimes striking.

As an entity this "Forza" sustained the sense of animation and enterprise that Bing has brought into the Metropolitan, if only by not too flattering comparison with previous high spots. Setting aside the inequalities of production and staging already mentioned, one could only express the highest admiration for the musicality embodied in the over-all conception, the exceptional order of vocal art provided by the stellar quartet of Milanov, Warren, Tucker, and Siepi. Vocal virtue may, in the Keats phrase, be "writ in water" but one need not summon dusty reminiscences of Caruso and Scotti to make much of Tucker and Warren in "Solenne in



Leonard Warren—"touchstones redefined."

quest'ora" or of Ponselle and Rethberg to honor the present beauties of Milanov's "Pace, pace." Thus are standards renewed, touchstones redefined.

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**F**OR his second presentation of a stage work in the still young season of the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, Dimitri Mitropoulos chose the vast, intricate "Christophe Colomb" of Darius Milhaud, a novelty in America though its premiere dates to Berlin and 1930. In accordance with present procedures, the English text was considered self-explanatory of the action, with no word-by-word parallel for the eye. Too little of it could be understood for intelligent illumination of the action, too much of it was a drain on the attention for appropriate appreciation of the music.

These facts certainly were a major cause for the heavy departure of listeners at the end of the lengthy (nearly an hour and a quarter) first half. Conceivably, one might have adjusted to the noisy clamor of Milhaud's score had one been aware of its justification in the "argument." However, this was denied an audience further confused by Paul Claudel's elaborate conception of a "terrestrial Columbus" and a "Columbus in perpetuity," with the action conceived in terms of flashbacks from a beginning with the aged navigator, at the point of death, reliving his life of glory and dishonor.

Thus, the initial stimulation provided by Milhaud's bold orchestral and choral writing gave way to an increasing irritation with the waves of sounds and cascades of tone that one could relate only in the most general way to the subject matter. For all the intellectual power applied by Mitropoulos to the problem, there were fun-

damental weaknesses in the acoustical concept which placed the Narrator (John Brownlee) at one side of the stage, the two figures of Columbus (Mack Harrell and Norman Scott) in the middle, and various others enacted by Adolph Anderson and David Lloyd at the opposite side. Dorothy Dow, who sang the music of Isabella, entered and left from the wings. A similar disregard for aural focus in the Mitropoulos presentation of "Elijah" last spring had, at least, the binding force of Mendelssohn's familiar score; in this instance, one doubted at the end that anything really representative of Milhaud had been heard, despite the honest effort (and sizable budget) expended.

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The deviations from previous procedure in this season's scheme of the New Friends of Music produced, at the first two concerts in Town Hall, a hearing of Aaron Copland's "Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson" and quartets of Mozart and Bartók at the opening session, and half-concert, half-dramatic versions of Purcell's "Witch of Endor" and J. J. Rousseau's "Le Devin du Village" at the second. It is too early to say that the deviations produced the uncommon number of empty seats visible.

The opera effort had its interests in the grave nobility of Purcell's score, the lightly frisky attributes of Rousseau's, but both were in the no-man's land, performance-wise, between the studentish "workshop" undertaking and the solidly professional. Since such thoughts never intruded previously into consideration of the New Friends' music-making, one can only report that the deviations of procedure have also brought unwelcome alterations of standards.

The beginning, on the previous Sunday, with composer Copland playing the piano for Patricia Neway's singing was high minded, but only occasionally auspicious. Actually, part of the problem was the same as the Philharmonic's with Milhaud: the notion that use of an English text assures the listener of knowing what is being sung. Whether the fault was Copland's, for not realizing the value of the words more completely, or Miss Neway's, for not projecting them more clearly, one could not readily say. The best of the set—"Dear March, Come in" and "Going to Heaven"—made their points strongly through a musical texture that caught and sustained an underlying mood, rather than relying, as "Why Do They Shut Me out of Heaven?" and "I've Heard an Organ Talk Sometimes," on a syllable by syllable enunciation that just couldn't be heard.

—IRVING KOLODIN.



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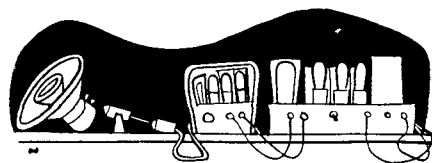
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# TV and Radio

## A FORUM FOR THE LOSER



**B**EING occupied in the radio and television branch of show business, where it was considered foolhardy for an actor or a writer to state publicly whether he was for Eisenhower or for Stevenson unless he happened to be for Eisenhower, I shall try this week to write a short piece about the man who lost the election.

And please note I did not say the "best" man lost. I know better. Grammatically.

My concern with Mr. Stevenson is not as a politico. It's video. I believe that any man who can hold an audience of some twenty-six million as he did from eight o'clock the night of November 4 until one-thirty the morning of November 5, just to see and hear one of the most poignant and patriotic concessions ever spoken by a candidate to our highest office, is deserving of consideration by any smart big-business sponsor, whether he voted conservatively, liberally, or accidentally for Darlington Hoopes.

I am suggesting a weekly half-hour television program starring Adlai Stevenson, where as the articulate opposition he can check on the state of the nation—a watchdog of the Republic, if you will. From a business standpoint alone, considering the ready-made audience of twenty-six million viewers, to say nothing of the thousands of letters and telegrams the Governor received after the election, any sponsor should readily see the sales possibilities for any product. Especially if the commercials are handled less annoyingly than they were during the telecasts of the election returns and the conventions, where almost every five minutes it was time for a range. Or an icebox. Or a TV set.

The time is now. Now that television has gone in for so many domestic situation programs. Here is a domestic situation program with a little foreign policy thrown in for full measure.

I read in the papers where there has been talk of raising a fund to buy television time for Mr. Stevenson to speak. This, as any time buyer along Madison Avenue will tell you, is not a smart idea. The time available for such a project is not choice time. A sponsor with a network of stations is able to buy time when audiences are most available, including time for re-

peat broadcasts for the West Coast. And I think we are all non-partisanly agreed that Mr. Stevenson's scripts would be the same for the West Coast as they would be for the North Coast and for the South.

If Stevenson had been elected I would be suggesting a weekly half-hour television program for Eisenhower, where he as the loyal opposition could check on the state of the nation—a watchdog of the Republic, if you will. It would be the duty of both my hypothetical television stars to condemn the good and deplore the bad.

**R**EALIZING, of course, that that which a Democrat might call good would be considered bad by a good Republican, and vice versa, I am thinking more of the actual campaign promises. In the old days of radio a campaign promise fell lightly upon the ear. Nothing falls lightly upon the eye AND ear. Since the advent of television, as any huckster worth his 15 per cent will tell you, the impact is three point something as great as that of radio.

Were Stevenson President, elected, for instance, on one of his promises to fight for FEPC, and once in office he made no concerted effort to bring about the FEPC he had promised, it would be General Eisenhower's function on his weekly program to keep asking, "How about the FEPC promised by the Democratic candidate?" Just as it would be Mr. Stevenson's function on the program to ask, for instance, "How about the reduction in taxes?" to which the general committed himself during his campaign.

The campaigning candidates win their votes by their promises. The voters, hearing both sides, decide and choose the man who promises them the government they most want. It is only fair they should get it. It is only fair they should have someone speaking for them when they don't get it.

Now that Mr. Stevenson has so successfully not succeeded in winning the election he is just right for such a television program. Even his most bitter opponents who acclaimed the campaign he carried on will admit he is not a man to place party politics above love of country. He will speak reason. Is this treason? —GOODMAN ACE.