

Music to My Ears

ORMANDY AS PROFESSOR—BARTOK-RAVEL DOUBLE BILL

PHILADELPHIA is barely a post-breakfast snooze across Jersey from New York but the enterprise which drew me there on a recent day showed an esthetic gulf in the operation of the orchestras of the two cities vastly larger than the distance between them. As an example of community pride rather than the rather routine professionalism that animates (if that is the accurate word) the work of the Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra's pre-season seminar in conducting under Eugene Ormandy's guidance was especially fruitful, since the community in this instance was the general musical one of America.

At hand were nearly thirty youngish conductors of community orchestras across the land. A dozen were chosen, more or less by lot, to show their wares as practising conductors in rehearsals with the Philadelphia Orchestra, while Ormandy stood by, made notes, and observed results. Then, together with some thirty other conductors present as observers, the results were openly discussed, suggestions were offered, and the general problems of pursuing such a career laid on the table and dissected.

Unquestionably the results were beneficial, for all the participants learned something of value. Whether the participation of the Philadelphia Orchestra itself was just what the situation demanded might be questioned. It took this great orchestra most of a day to forget how to play the "Meistersinger" Overture of Wagner magnificently and to play it just as some of the less experienced young men directed. As an example of iron will, this ranks high in my experiences of observation. But it was evident that the characteristic temper was that which might prevail were a high-school dramatic student asked to play a love scene with Lana Turner—enthusiasm tempered by respect.

The few that got down to brass (and woodwind) tacks showed that there is latent talent scattered around the land that could be developed. Also that they would profit mightily from the counsel and criticism of Ormandy. But I think that the vast good will that animated this experiment conceived by Harl MacDonald, manager of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Mrs. Helen Thompson, of the American Symphony Orchestra League, should—and probably will—evolve

another and more effective formula to carry on an excellent work well begun.

* * *

"Bluebeard's Castle" is a one-act opera by the Béla Bartók of 1911 which has haunted us from the textbooks as a possibly neglected masterpiece. "L'Heure Espagnole" is a one-act opera by Maurice Ravel which has come and gone often enough for us to know that it is no major masterpiece, but a sound little theatre work worth an occasional revival. The combination on a recent City Center bill was an intellectual antidote for "Cav" and "Pag" which will hardly break box-office records but was eminently worth doing.

Cleverly staged by John Butler in an imaginative framework by Rouben Ter-Arutunian, "Bluebeard's Castle" had every opportunity to make an effect. Butler even took the liberty of adding a danced figure described as "Judith's Inner Self" to simulate an activity not contained in the long dialogues of Bluebeard (James Pease) and Judith (Ann Ayres). Much more of the symbolism of the seven doors was spelled out than was contained in the original plan, and an English text was provided to give the venture every opportunity to make its effect.

What defeated it, in the final analysis, was the turgid flow of the score, its leisurely progress from point to point, its lack of theatrical incisiveness and economy. Beauty it has in abundance, but at scattered moments; it also has a choppy vocal line derived from a post-"Pelléas" technique that lacks the savor of the original. Much of what the orchestra does foreshadows later tendencies of Bartók, but its attention-absorbing power is not sufficient. I have rarely seen Pease do as good a job as he did of Bluebeard (with an actual, visibly blue beard) and Ayres was excellent as Judith.

The lighter colors of "L'Heure Espagnole" might have been a dazzling success given such a conductor as Jean Paul Morel to mix the tints. Tullio Serafin's taste dictated rather majestic tempos and broad brush strokes that slowed down but did not bring to a halt the high-spirited cast, of which Gail Manners, a newcomer, was an especial pleasure. Her Concepción, both ardent and impatient, was also delightfully sung, with an accent of youth decidedly welcome. Walter Cassell's *muletier*, David Lloyd's poet, and

Aaron Copland

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Carlton Gauld's financier were likable in their several ways. Ter-Aruntunian's visual frame for this work was singularly successful.

* * *

"The Harvest According," which the Ballet Theatre gave for the first time early in October at the Metropolitan, is a dance work many, many levels above the average. Agnes de Mille's choreography takes a mature view of the mature thought expressed in Walt Whitman's "Life, life is the tillage and death is the harvest according." Virgil Thomson's score is an elaboration of his peculiar talent bordering on genius for making an "American sound" with an orchestra, and Lem Ayres's scenery and costumes are definitely first rate.

The totality, however, does not impress me to be as good as it can be. What De Mille is saying to us is that man is born of woman's pain and leaves pain behind in his fatalistic absorption with battlefields. Childhood games and adolescent courtship are bright, but evanescent, interludes between. Throughout, the group dances are more powerfully realized than the episodes involving the principals (Gemze de Lappe, Ruth Ann Koesun, and Kelly Brown, all excellent). Each of the threads they represent is a rich one, but it did not strike me that they have been drawn through tightly enough to make a decisive pattern.

However, "The Harvest According" has the advantage of an excellently atmospheric, worth-hearing-several-times score, derived from a variety of Thomson works including his cello concerto. It would surprise him, no doubt, to learn that some of his procedures suggested Richard Strauss; less, I think, that some others suggested Charles Ives. But it has a strictly Thomsonian texture throughout, and a way of using brass strongly New, rather than Old, World. Ballets, after all, are made, not born; and "The Harvest According" needs no more than incidental remaking to give it a continuous force it now lacks.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

Record Week

The time would never come, I thought, when one would go on record in favor of the Ur-texts of the Arthur Sullivan overtures "Iolanthe," "Pirates of Penzance," and "Yeoman of the Guard," not to mention the more familiar "Mikado" and "HMS Pinafore") in preference to such a glorified potpourri as Charles Mackerras made in "Pineapple Poll." But then, it never seemed a time would come when these works would be played for all they are worth by

Arthur Fiedler and the Boston "Pops" Orchestra, and recorded with a full complement of RCA Victor skills (LM 7006, \$4.67).

This may be described as a super-Godfrey (Isidore, not Arthur) production, in which the spirit is pitched beautifully between under- and over-excitement, with all the tonal values in place, and no scratching of the head to determine which elevation of the brow is proper for your typical Savoyard. Fiedler merely plays them with all the art at his command and the results are winning indeed. Listen, for example, to the clean trumpet solo in "Pirates" or the delightful flutes in "Iolanthe" and you'll have to agree that no performance is too good for music worth performing.

In a more familiar pattern of orchestra virtuosity is the collection of Rossini overtures on London LL 358 (\$5.95) in which Eduard van Beinum puts the Amsterdam Concertgebouw through the paces of "Scala di Sieti," "Semiramide," "Guglielmo Tell," and "La Gazza Ladra." This is sumptuous execution and practically a paragon of reproduction, but there is more suavity and definition in Toscanini's versions of the same works, and a substantially livelier spirit in the Beecham treatment of same. Van Beinum, it appears, is a conductor who can do almost anything nearly as well as anybody else; but, so far, not very much better than everybody else. Not Rossini, for sure, though this is a splendidly produced disc in every way but the indefinite integer of "style."

In prospect, that same element seemed the one likely to be lacking in Joseph Keilberth's performance with the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra, on Capitol 8164 (\$4.98) of the "Leonora No. 3" and "Coriolanus" overtures, and the "Egmont" with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. However, there is nothing like a recorded performance to encourage an objective judgment: and the listening test was in favor of Keilberth's musicality.

Though the works are soundly played, it is clear that each exists in a more satisfying version than Keilberth provides. As for recorded quality, it is quite adequate without verging on real distinction. If there is anything uncommon about this venture as a whole, it is the unexpectedly good quality of the Bamberg Symphony, considering the modest size of that Bavarian town.

—I. K.



BELLES-LETTRES

(Continued from page 27)

eral Frémont, the prophet Moses, and Robert Browning. If America did not influence his poetry directly, it made him a warm Ameriphile; like most people he did not dislike flattery. In the 1880's, when his growing number of readers found his poetry obscure, Browning societies were organized to dig out the meaning embedded in his crusty verse. What has happened to that kind of earnest reader today? He probably takes courses in universities, reads the critical quarterlies (to dig at the digging).

Louise Greer has written an odd kind of book on all this, one that combines biographical, social, literary, and publishing history: "Browning and America" (University of North Carolina Press, \$4). Occasionally her writing is bumpy, when she has not melted her data smoothly. She succeeds, certainly, in illuminating much in Browning and in the cultural temper of America in his time.

—ROBERT HALSBAND.

PROSE OF A LIBRETTIST: Hugo von Hofmannsthal is best known to the general reader—or more properly, to the general opera-listener—as the librettist for Strauss's enchanting "Rosenskavalier" and terrifying "Elektra." His claim to greater literary importance lies in his varied and voluminous writings, which will fill fourteen volumes when collected. A new and representative selection, translated by Mary Hottinger and Tania and James Stern as "Selected Prose" (Pantheon Books, \$4.50), consists of narratives of various lengths, essays on travel (in Greece and northern Africa) and on literary topics (Shakespeare, Balzac, Wilde), and concludes with a group of mixed maxims. The essays are easily the most interesting of the varied pieces, for despite a tiresome concern with esthetics and introspection (which deaden much of the narrative) they often strike off fresh ideas and images, and often suggest a mythic resonance that is unforced.

The narratives, especially the long fragment of the novel "Andreas," are so beclouded with symbolisms and mythicisms and weighed down by stage-costuming that they lose whatever tension might have held the reader. One brief piece, however, entitled "Lucidor," is a happy exception—it is an unpretentious comedy of witty intrigue, and deals with sentiment and humor in a completely successful compass. (It is the basis for