The Met's New "Faust"

By IRVING KOLODIN

ROLF GERARD is a man with an odd inversion of faculties which would be grounds for a medical examination were he not, withal, one of the leading scenic designers of the day. To put it briefly, he sees music and he hears color. In some circumstances this would be rated a confusion of foci which would disqualify him, for example, from admission to West Point or Annapolis. Fortunately, he elected to pursue the arts of peace rather than those of war, thus putting to profitable use his conviction that the atmosphere of the music should determine its visual presentation. He even goes so far as to contend that "Faust," being a romantic French opera by virtue of Gounod's music, should be set as French romantic rather than German post-Gothic. In no case pre-Goethic.

As a result of these unorthodox though highly logical contentions, the production of "Faust" which will initiate the Metropolitan's next season will be—in conception at least—decidedly at variance with those which have preceded it. As an instance of the *tempo escargot* at which artistic evolutions occur at the Metropolitan, it may be mentioned that the last new production there of "Faust" was designed by Josef Urban in 1917. The conductor was the robust, prime-of-life, forty-two-year-old Pierre Monteux.

The conductor of the current redesigning by Gerard, with Peter Brook as stage director, is the still robust but verging on venerable seventy-seven-year-old Pierre Monteux. The morale is that Gerard's conception better be good because, as it was said of Lincoln when he died, so it may be said of a Met production when it is born: "Now it belongs to the ages."

Surveying the prospects informally with Gerard—who has given sure evidence of his ability to cope with the Metropolitan problem in such notable accomplishments as his spacious "Don Carlo," his gay "Fledermaus," and his deft "Così," as well as the more debatable "Carmen" and "Aida"—one perceives a certain refreshing realism in his candidly abstract thinking. "I listen to the prelude," he says, "and I am filled with a sense of the French romantic spirit. It soars, it expands, it engulfs you with a sweet kind of poetry that is charming, but very unreal."

What about Goethe's Nuremberg, the pancake hats, and the beribboned knickers which have become as much a part of the Met's traditional "Faust" as the portly Marguerite and muscle-bound Méphistophélès? Gerard answered politely but firmly with another question: "Where is Nuremberg in the music?" he challenged. "Of course, it isn't. So there will be no pancake hats and no knickers, possibly even no spinning wheel, if the atmosphere of the 'Roi de Thule' ballade can be conveyed in some other way."

"Brook and I," he continued, "decided to listen to the whole thing, from records, like two people who had never seen 'Faust.' The outcome was a complete agreement that here was a work absolutely French, with the kind of romantic atmosphere that made people believe that Paganini was in league with the devil, and gave life on the operatic stage to the supernatural fantasies of E. T. A. Hoffmann as Offenbach set them. The ballet 'Giselle' comes out of this general period, and so many other things—Daumier, for example—in which the imagination plays with the real and the unreal. So we make Méphistophélès a kind of Cagliostro, with superhuman attributes—not a traditional Satan with horns, but someone who commands magic and trickery."

Here, of course, is the point at which fantasy must confront the requirements of reality, namely the circumstance that the Méphistophélès of this new conception of "Faust" is a palpable human being—not the slightest bit muscle-bound—named Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, who must be assumed to have a considerable interest in how this whole project works out. He is, after all, a world-famous artist staking his New York debut on this part.

HE WAS carrying an ivory headed aristocratic cane as the rehearsals progressed from diffusion through confusion to execution, which led to some questions. "It is my own, yes. I bought it in Florence in antique shop, for King Philip in 'Don Carlo.' Here in 'Kermesse Scene' is mostly prop, though I use it like baton to conduct chorus in 'Veau d'Or' music. But when trouble comes and my power is challenged," he said, whipping it in his hand, "it becomes a sword. See?" An authentic if hardly friendly relic, it was convincing to the extent of blending the appurtenances of a gentleman with the flashing sword skill of Valentin's assassin. And, as the great Princes of Darkness from Plançon to Journet, and De Reszke to Chaliapin, have insisted, Méphistophélès was a gentleman first and a bass-baritone second.

Sometimes even the composer himself has said something worth considering about the nature of the character he has created. Speaking of Belanqué, the Mephistophélès of the original production at the Opéra Comique in 1859 (it was not expanded into its present form with recitatives and elaborate ballets until ten years later), Gounod remarked: "He was an intelligent comedian, whose play, physique, and voice lent themselves admirably to this fantastic and Satanic personage." Too often the interpretative artist imports into Gounod's

Rolf Gerard and Peter Brook—"a refreshing realism in abstract thinking."

"fantastic" characterization the sardonic and sinister elements much more appropriate to Arrigo Boito's "Mefistofele." As the late W. J. Henderson once wrote, "The arch fiend of Gounod is always operatic and always a gentleman—*un gallant homme.*"

The enterprising soul charged with seeing that these values retain their traditional relationship in the new plan of action is a medium-sized man with large glasses, most of whose hair had obviously been long since sacrificed on the altar of previous difficult assignments, not the least of which was the recent TV "King Lear" with Orson Welles. Mention Peter Brook to a well-indoctrinated opera fan and you evoke the image of an ogre who put on Strauss's "Salome" in London's Covent Garden in such style as to make the reviews required matter, even at cable rates, for the next day's *New York Times.* (Dali was the designer.)

Mildness, however, could have no more beguiling aspect than Brook presents to the interviewer. "There is nothing iconoclastic about this conception," he insists, referring to the realignment of time and the reassignment of place which puts this "Faust" on Gounod's side of the Rhine rather than Goethe's. "In fact, when it comes to staging opera the music is generally such an all-powerful element that you *have* to work with it. I did a 'Bohème' in London not long ago for which the perfect atmosphere was a reconstruction of the very first 'Bohème' ever staged. . . . We worked from glassplate photos that Puccini himself had taken of it. It was right in every atmospheric detail."

"Here," he said, waving toward the stage of the opera house, where set pieces were beginning to accumulate, "we think of 'Faust' as a series of vignettes seen through the French illustrations of the 1850's or thereabouts. In order to diminish the size of the Metropolitan's huge proscenium we use a forecurtain with an irregular sort of circular shape to frame the action. By using a scrim arrangement as the lights come up on Faust's study at the beginning, with a cloud illusion passing over it, we hope to give the impression that this is all something in the nature of a fantasy, the kind of romantic image that Gerard has been describing."

"Then," he went on to another line of thought, "there are the waltz rhythms that recur in the score, in the 'Kermesse' and of course the 'Jewel Song.' They are a key of another kind to the treatment that is indicated. And, finally, the kinds of relationships with Goethe's 'Faust,' which seemed important when Gounod wrote this opera, have greatly receded from us. What assures the continuing existence of the public's interest—which is to say, your interest and mine—is Gounod's music, and nothing else."

Considering that this was a score that was denounced as "tiresome" and "old-fashioned" seventy years ago when it served the same season-opening purpose, it would be hard to overrate its durability. And it should be a source of comfort that this agreement on the importance of musical values should be shared by the designer and director, for one has good reason to believe that Pierre Monteux will be conducting a French "Faust" from the pit, no matter what deviltry is occuring on stage. For the sake of the next generation, plus, of Metropolitan "Faust" viewers, one can only hope that the "human element" does not impede the planners from realizing the good sense in their plan.

The Met Repertory on Records

By MAX DE SCHAUENSEE

THE new season of grand opera at Thirty-Ninth Street and Broadway is almost upon us, as the Metropolitan celebrates its seventieth anniversary (though only sixty-nine years of actual operatic activity) with a restudied, restaged performance of Gounod's "Faust." This is a nice and nostalgic gesture on the part of Rudolf Bing, for it was with "Faust" that the Metropolitan first opened its doors to an excited public, on October 22, 1883. This is all very well for the New Yorker, for the visitor to New York, for the tour cities, and for the nation as a whole on Saturday afternoons. But there are other places and other times, and the ways of having opera where and when the auditor wishes are more varied than ever before. With the advent five years ago of LP recording, the complete opera on records has become a commonplace. Not only are the staples of the operatic repertoire given much attention, but rarities such as "Un Giorno di Regno," "I Puritani," and "Francesca da Rimini" have been recorded, so that we now have the opportunity of hearing operas we might never have experienced otherwise. Twenty-one of the twenty-two operas included in the Metropolitan's repertoire for 1953-54 have been recorded (usually in several versions), and it is with these that I am concerned here.

"Faust," the season's opening gun, has been recorded by Columbia (SL-112) and by RCA Victor (LCT-6100). Neither performance is really satisfactory. Columbia's, which is a Metropolitan Opera production, is tonally the more resonant of the two, for RCA's is an LP transfer from 78 rpm, but Columbia's Fausto Cleva and his cast smack of routine. Sir Thomas Beecham, on RCA, breathes life into his forces, recruited from the Paris Opéra. Géori Boué has any amount of style and musicianship for the music of Marguerite, but an acidulous tone. On the other hand, Eleanor Steber's *pianissimi* are velvety in the Garden Scene. Do not despair, however; RCA will issue a new recording of "Faust," with much of the cast of the Met opening, come spring.

The other two new productions of the coming Metropolitan season are **"Tannhaüser"** and **"The Barber of Seville."** Urania has provided the only recording of **"Tannhaüser,"** employing the Munich Opera forces under the baton of Robert Heger for the purpose (Urania 211). Here you will find a idiomatic performance which makes its points while providing fine sound.

Rossini's ever young **"Barber"** rates three complete versions: by RCA Victor (LM-6104), Cetra (1211), and Columbia (EL-1). I would cast my lot for the bright, well-balanced Cetra performance, with Giuseppe Taddei an admirable Figaro and Giulietta Simionato an attractive Rosina. RCA Victor's Victoria de los Angeles seems a bit staid for this role, despite her beautifully controlled singing. Nicola Rossi-Lemeni's Basilio and the presence of Tullio Serafin as conductor are also reasons for serious consideration. Columbia's is a reissue on LP of its 1928 recording with the celebrated veteran Riccardo Stracciari a classic Figaro.

For the Mozart fan, who has been handsomely favored at the Met in recent years, the LP catalogue offers more than passable consolation for the stay-at-homes. RCA Victor (LCT-6102) and the Haydn Society (2031) supply contrasting performances of **"Don Giovanni."** The RCA set, recorded in 1936, is a precious musical legacy bequeathed to us by the late Fritz Busch and his Glyndebourne forces. Here we find a magnificently drilled cast, headed by John Brownlee, Ina Souez, and Baccaloni, and an overall attention to detail that is far from ordinary. To be sure, the sound cannot compare with that in the Haydn records, which were made fourteen years later, but conductor Hans Swarowsky is hardly the equal of Busch.

Glyndebourne is responsible also for a surpassing performance of **"Nozze di Figaro"** (RCA Victor LCT-6001), with Fritz Busch very much in control. This is successfully transferred to LP records, and it has been a treasured addition to the phonographic lives of numberless opera lovers. However, the vivid reproduction of the recent Columbia set (SL-122) is superior, and there is no denying the persuasive conducting of Von Karajan, or the fine singing of Jurinac, Seefried, and Schwarzkopf. Cetra offers but a fair version (1219), well conducted by Previtale.

The three recordings of **"Così fan tutte"** pose the question as to whether you prefer your Mozart in Italian or English. Columbia's fine version is a Metropolitan Opera production, and presents Steber, Thebom, Peters, Tucker, Guarrera, and Alvary in the English translation by Ruth and Thomas Martin. Beautifully recorded, with Fritz Stiedry conducting, one can derive genuine enjoyment from one of director Bing's most successful innovations. Busch's Glyndebourne performance (RCA Victor LCT-6104), though bearing the stamp of his splendid discipline and the presence of Ina Souez as Fiordiligi, suffers from inferior reproduction. It is sung in Italian. So is Remington's (199-117), which cannot compare in any musical way. However, the low price provides some justification for its existence.

CONFRONTED by the two procurable **"Fledermaus"** recordings (Columbia SL-108 and London LL-28½), one's choice depends on whether one is seeking a cast of Metropolitan names in the recent English version under Ormandy, or a really authentic performance which exudes Viennese charm and is superbly recorded. The conducting of Clemens Krauss and the presence of Gueden, Lipp, and Patzak are no mean considerations in support of London's set.

"Carmen" also exists in multiple and in varied treatments. Columbia (SL-109) presents the Opéra Comique forces under André Cluytens in an authentic performance that somehow misses fire. The original spoken dialogue is used and the reproduction is realistic. More exciting is RCA Victor's version (LM-6102), which finds Fritz Reiner in an invigorating mood and Risë Stevens, Licia Albanese, Jan Peerce, and Robert Merrill at their vocal best. London's version (LLA-6), though vividly reproduced, is definitely inferior.

Speaking of French opera, **"Pelléas et Mélisande"** is one of the Metropolitan's coming revivals. RCA has just deleted from the catalogue its dated but atmospheric set, leaving the field to London's superbly recorded version (LLA-11) with Suzanne Danco a lovely Mélisande and Pierre Mollet a fine Pelléas.

Last year's novelty, **"The Rake's Progress,"** has just been released by Columbia (SL-125) with Igor Stravinsky conducting his own score. A complete Metropolitan production has been brilliantly recorded.

"Boris Godunov," though limited to versions in Rimsky's edition, is one of the finest operatic sets in existence