



MUSIC TO MY EARS

“Nutcracker,” Thomson “Pieces,” “Walküre”

GEORGE BALANCHINE has crowned his many fine services to ballet in general and Tchaikovsky in particular with a version of “The Nutcracker” which makes a visit to the City Center when the New York Ballet is on its home territory, or wherever it travels, obligatory. The first full-evening ballet this choreographer has undertaken for the company he created, it should be the forerunner to many others. No one ever doubted Balanchine’s ability to sustain an effort for the, so to speak, championship distance, but if he is to be commended for the first demonstration of it, here it is.

Memory dimly recalls a “Nutcracker” that was “medium” full-length, danced by one of the De Basil companies in the Hollywood Theatre late in the Thirties, but that was just a shadowy suggestion of the thing Balanchine has reconstructed out of childhood experiences with the work in Petrograd. Aply assisted by Horace Armistead, whose scenic design is considerably more fanciful than anything he has done for the Metropolitan, and the costuming of Karinska—not to forget a vigorous, forward-moving performance of the grand score under the direction of Leon Barzin—Balanchine has come close to measuring up to the mark that any full-length Tchaikovsky production in this country must now meet. That is, of course, the Sadler’s Wells standard in “Sleeping Beauty” and “Swan Lake.”

As may be suspected from the fact that “The Nutcracker” is a Christmas-time story, it has much to do with children—how much, one could only discover from Balanchine’s artful use of an ensemble from the School of American Ballet as participants in the tree-trimming ceremony with which the action begins, and as performers in the lengthy “dream” during which the celebrated divertissements (“Sugar Plum Fairy,” “Dance of the Flutes,” “Waltz of the Flowers,” “Arabian” and “Chinese” Dances) are performed in Act II. Blond little Paul Nickel, who is the Prince Charming to Alberta Grant, the youthful dreamer, is every man’s idea of what he looked like as a child (few did), and his assurance in pantomime contributed much to the artistic quality of the whole.

On the adult side, Balanchine chose perfectly in casting Francisco Moncion in the “Arabian Dance,” Janet Reed in the “Flute” episode, Tanaquil LeClercq as the Dewdrop on the bouquet in the “Flower Waltz,” and Maria Tallchief as the Sugar Plum Fairy. In a notable demonstration of his own virtuosity as choreographer and the strength of his musical feeling, he achieved the climax just where it ought to be—in the *pas de deux* of the Sugar Plum Fairy and her partner, Nicholas Magallanes. Balanchine may have studied out the relationship of action and music more effectively in another *pas de deux*, but if so I cannot recall it. With perfect poise, he lets the music soar without competing action, but when it lets down even slightly, he is ready with visual patterns that keep the excitement at a high pitch. Miss Tallchief gives one of her best performances in this episode—better, needless to say, the more difficult it becomes—and Magallanes is more than capable.

In its costuming and scenic variety “The Nutcracker” may be the most costly ballet this company has yet presented. But it should be a welcome recurrence in the repertory for years to come. In any case, it adds substantially to Balanchine’s credit balance as not merely a great choreographer, but a still developing and growing one.

Thanks to a lengthy intermission between the two acts of “Nutcracker,” I was able to hear that portion of the Philadelphia Orchestra’s program in Carnegie Hall in which Virgil Thomson conducted his “Three Pieces for Orchestra.” Two of them—“The Seine at Night” and “Wheat Field at Noon”—have been played here previously without stirring any great desire for a repetition, and the addition of “Sea Piece with Birds” did not alter the situation materially. Thomson knows the orchestra and uses it capably, but the pictorial substance of these “Pictures” is slight.

The return of Ferdinand Frantz to sing Wotan and the first appearances at the Metropolitan of Margaret Harshaw as Brünnhilde and Hans Hotter as Hunding were among the special reasons for welcoming the reappearance of “Die Walküre” in the opera’s repertory. What started out as a smoldering brush fire under Fritz

Stiedry’s leisurely direction of Act I became a roaring conflagration before the evening was over, thanks to his response to the tempestuous substance of this great work and the resourceful cast under his direction. Frantz returns (after an absence since February 1951) as one of the most authoritative Wotans in years. He also sings the music powerfully, though his first performance suggested a little apprehension about his top tones, not formerly a characteristic of his Wotan.

MISS HARSHAW’S first New York Brünnhilde in this part of the cycle (she had sung it last fall in Covent Garden) has so much that is good that one regrets drawing attention to its deficiencies. She can, for one thing, sing all the notes cleanly, surely, and squarely on pitch, with a driving intensity in the top range that makes her “Yo-ho-to-ho” the war cry of a laughing goddess it is meant to be. She can also produce the broadly solemn sound to make the “Announcement of Death” impressive, and the compelling force to match the passion Wagner poured into the pronouncement that it is Sieglinde’s destiny to bear the hero Siegfried.

It strikes me, however, that Miss Harshaw inclines to let down slightly between the great moments of the part, that she forgets to make her voice work for her in the discussions with Wotan in Act II and the early portions of Act III. And if she is not careful, her normal problem in suggesting an athletic heroine is going to become insuperable. At that, it was a solid success for a first effort, leaving one with admiration for what she has done to date and hope that the future holds even more.

Astrid Varnay made a credible dramatic figure of Sieglinde, while singing erratically, and Set Svanholm is as good-looking a Siegmund as there is, though a tensely monotonous vocal one for all his intelligence and style. Hotter’s Hunding was suitable in physical size for the enormous tree whose shade provides his *lebensraum*, and with a voice of equivalent size, though rather quavery quality. His skill in doing so much with it was impressive. Blanche Thebom’s Fricka is well sung, if overstylized in action, and the excellent set of Walküren included Mariquita Moll, making a competent debut in the limited part of Waltraute.

Fernando Corena, a bass-baritone of substantial repute from Italy, made himself welcome at a recent Metropolitan “Don Giovanni” with an impersonation of Leporello that

(Continued on page 51)

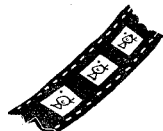
TOOLS FOR TEACHING



BOOKS



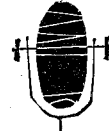
FILMS



FILMSTRIPS



RECORDS



RADIO



TELEVISION



TRAVEL

The textbook, virtually the only teaching tool Americans of adult years remember, has been joined in recent years by other media of communication eminently suited to school use: films, filmstrips, recordings, radio, television, and travel. To bring adults up to date on what has been developing in these media since they acquired their diplomas, SR here

presents a series of surveys by specialists in each of the fields. Their publication coincides, appropriately enough, with the convening this week at Atlantic City, N. J., of 17,000 educators and civic leaders to attend the conventions of the American Association of School Administrators and thirty-four allied associations.

The Battle of Truth



Fred M. Hechinger is education editor of the New York Herald Tribune; contributor to "The Textbook Problem" (SR April 19, 1952)

By FRED M. HECHINGER

THINGS seem to have settled down a bit on the controversial textbook front. Since our last report a year ago there have been fewer outbursts concerning "objectionable" textbooks than in any single year since the end of the war. This does not mean that challenging situations have not occurred in various parts of the country, of which the Alabama episode described on the next page is probably the most serious. But at least the threatening epidemic of two years ago seems to have been forestalled. What follows is a brief checklist of incidents during the past year, some of which have already received prominent national attention, with some indication of the current status in each case.

• • The incident that received most attention was the objection of

Mrs. Thomas J. White of Indianapolis to the legendary character "Robin Hood," because—she said—he supported the "rob-the-rich Communist Party line." Mrs. White is a member of the Indiana Textbook Commission. She objected to other books, for various reasons. But though her statements hit the headlines, they led to no action.

• • In Los Angeles, despite American official support of UNESCO, use of teaching materials supporting that organization are still not permitted in the public schools.

• • In Shaftsbury, Vt., a state-sponsored and approved history of Vermont—"Vermont: A History of the Green Mountain State"—was banned as "subversive," but was later restored to the shelves, after a long list of organizations and individuals came to the defense of Edmund Fuller, the author. The school board

member who ordered removal of the book apparently never stated the reasons for his action.

• • Arkansas had a look at its sociology textbooks, and there were some heated arguments. It was claimed, according to a report in the *Little Rock (Arkansas) Democrat* that four books contained material "biased against American free enterprise system, constitutional government, traditional religion, and marriage." The charges against the books were made by President George S. Benson of Harding College.

The textbook "Sociology," by John F. Cuber, Mr. Benson indicated, spoke unfavorably of the free-enterprise system when it claimed that automobile manufacturers often changed merely the appearance and styling of their cars in order to make the previous product obsolete and sell new models.

Another sociology text, by William F. Ogburn, called modern society sick because of its high incidence of maladjusted persons. It referred to reports, in 1934, by Frankwood Williams, the late director of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in the United States, who had reported on certain favorable aspects of mental health in Soviet Russia at that time.

Although the matter was brought before the Arkansas Legislative Coun-