



MUSIC TO MY EARS

The Old Vic "Dream" in a New-World Setting

TAKEN individually, William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" of 1595-96 and the incidental but far from inconsequential music Felix Mendelssohn wrote for it in 1842 are two of the choicest expressions in the annals of the separate arts. Taken together, as they currently may be in the production by the Old Vic Company of London which S. Hurok is showing at the Met (soon to be followed by a coast to coast tour), they engage more senses than one would seem to have.

As these involve areas where Mendelssohn made an indivisible thing of music and the Shakespearean text it strikes me that Michael Benthall's direction, the choreography of Robert Helpmann (who also performs as Oberon), and the additional danced contributions of Frederick Ashton are consistently tasteful, atmospheric, and in a real sense distinguished—distinguished by a sense of appropriateness and suitability which might have gone wrong at many points but which didn't.

Scrutiny of an informative treatise in the "Dream" program book by Reginald P. Mander, archivist of the Vic-Wells Association, reveals there are two distinct "Dreams"—the intimate sort, in which Shakespeare's text is interspersed with folksongs and rigorously relevant archaic matter, and the gala kind, in which Mendelssohn's fancy gives additional soaring power to the poet's. This is decidedly of the latter sort, adding the witchery of ballet—the source from which Helpmann and his fair Titania, Moira Shearer, derived their fame—to the other, established elements. The fact that the opening night audience was heard to say, "Too bad there wasn't more ballet" is an indication of the transformation producer S. Hurok has worked in the common thinking. It is, indeed, akin to a child asking for a second helping of spinach. Ashton's interpretation of the famous nocturne as a lyrical *pas de deux* for Helpmann and Shearer, the elaboration of the "Wedding March" into a balletic

spectacle, and the magical realization of the ending *tableaux* spoke for themselves—provided you could understand the language. For those drama critics who rendered adverse judgments it was apparent that they just weren't tuned in.

Here, of course, is the essence of this production of the "Dream." Benthall's company is divided into three elements: straight actors who play the principal speaking roles with a good deal of authority, though (I gather from those who sat further back and to the sides than I did) with less than ideal intelligibility; a dancing-choral ensemble which also embraces the voices required by Mendelssohn; and the nuclear Helpmann and Shearer, who are in more or less equal parts dancers and spoken performers. Helpmann, by disposition and practice, has attained a more even balance of attributes. His is a guileful Oberon, well-spoken and admirable in movement. Miss Shearer's tall, titian Tita-

nia is not of maximum vocal appeal. Show me, however, one speaking twice as well who could move half as well and I will grant an argument.

The substantial fact is that the "Dream" is a fantasy, and those who aren't susceptible to it in terms of Mendelssohn's music are just not susceptible to this conception of it. Musically the usage of the "Wedding March" (fragmentarily) as a curtain-raiser seemed in dubious taste, till it was realized that the scheme of production treated the first episode at the Athenian court and the second with the workman as a kind of prologue, thus setting the two coordinate plots in motion. Putting the overture thereafter provided a perfect bridge to the enchanted "Wood Near Athens," and assured a reasonably audible playing of that wonderful work without the intrusion of latecomers.

THE striking beauties of this endeavor, its atmosphere, poetry, and humor, seem to me composed in equal parts of an affection for the graces of sight and sound, movement and music. This is a production done with love and understanding and enthusiasm, in which the various elements identified with the postwar British theatre have an equitable part.

As anyone acquainted with the Metropolitan knows, it is hardly an ideal platform for the spoken word, especially when the action carries the performers to remote areas of the ample stage. I cannot speak for those who could not hear; but at my place the sound was as expressive as the action.

No valuation of this undertaking would be complete without a tribute to the varied Bottom of Stanley Holloway. His is a musical voice from the outset, full of nuance and inflection, range and intonation. Endowed with outsized head, as the braying ass decked with flowers by the bewitched Titania, he attained some flights of verbal discourse hitherto reserved in musical connection—to Sir Thomas Beecham.

For those who may be wondering, Hugo Rignold, late of the Liverpool Philharmonic, directed the good-sized orchestra with discrimination and taste, a soft hand on the strings and warming one on the brass. Taken together with the opulent settings of the Ironsides, this was a "Dream" to make one happy to be ear- as well as eye-conscious.

—IRVING KOLODIN.



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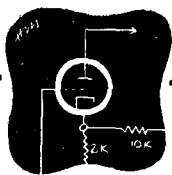
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SOME HIGHS AND LOWS

Music on a Wire or in the Round

WHATEVER else one may say of magnetic-recording devotees, no one can safely hint that their veins don't course with hot blood or that they lack courage to turn with a vengeance on any real or fancied attacker! At various rash moments in these columns I've pricked some of the more outrageous foibles of audiomania, but few discophiles or hi-fi fans ever have revealed such tender skins, explosive blood-pressure, or vigorous responses to challenge as their younger colleagues—the self-styled tape-worms.

Of the many letterary rebuttals to my “admittedly biased” report on pre-recorded tapes [SR July 31], at least three rank as valuable contributions to HIGHS AND LOWS's own Department of Amplification, Correction, and Abuse. One, from the public-relations agent of a leading tape manufacturer, is especially relished in that it provides quasi-official confirmation of my primary assertion that pre-recorded tape purchasers will be drawn mainly from outside rather than within the present disc-buying public. The typescript sent me of an interview with Paul W. Jansen, sales manager of the Magnetic Products Division of the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (makers of the popular “Scotch” brand), deals with the whole subject of “music on tape” more objectively, extensively, and intelligently than any other similar report I have ever seen.

Mr. Jansen sees the main markets for p-r tapes among home-recorder owners and industrial operators of “functional” background-music systems such as the Muzak and similar companies (a vast field which I had overlooked). He recognizes and expands on the disadvantages, which I had briefly enumerated, of tape as a medium for serious home-listening only, and he even stresses one I had passed over—the same troublesome lack of standardization in recording characteristics which up to recently plagued discs.

At the same time Mr. Jansen ably documents a prophecy that most of these disadvantages will be overcome in time, particularly with the improved design and distribution of high-quality tape-playback-only mechanisms for use, interchangeably with FM/AM tuners and disc-players,

in present hi-fi amplifier and speaker systems.

Apparently I was on sound enough ground when I discussed *commercial* p-r tapes, but my mischievously gratuitous comment on the home-recording fans who “swap ‘sound-letters’ closely akin to the gab-fests of adolescent radio ‘hams’” left me wide open to reminders that even this hobby has its more serious practitioners. Mrs. Harry Matthews, wife of the World Tape Pals' secretary, provided the gentlest yet most persuasive of these, impressively documenting the fact that the exchange of tapes can be conducted on an international scope and a notably mature level. I hasten to agree that the cruder exhibitionism of some juvenile tape-worms is by no means representative, and although I still fear that even the best of them are lamentably unconcerned with *musical* experience, I am glad to commend any SR readers interested in international paldom to the World Tape Pals, P. O. Box 9211, Dallas, Texas. Incidentally, the activities of this and other tape-clubs are regularly chronicled, along with multitudinous other tape-worm activities, in the bi-monthly issues of the lively if brash *Tape Recording* magazine, Severna Park, Maryland.

Rounding out the responses from a tape manufacturer and a tape-for-world-friendship evangelist, Mr. John C. Bird, of Spring Lake, New Jersey, is an eloquent spokesman for the mature audio connoisseur who makes the best of complementary rather than warring media. Again there is no quarrel with my stand on commercial p-r tapes (although he rightly minimizes the handicaps in tape-playing and storage where serious rather than casual users are concerned), but he makes out a strong case for augmenting a catholic disc library with carefully home-recorded types. Since I assumed a temporary rôle as devil's advocate for the cause of discs in direct opposition to that of tapes only because I feared that the exaggerated claims of a few over-enthusiastic tape-worms would lead to public confusion and misconceptions, I'm of course in fundamental agreement with Mr. Bird that there need be no real conflict between them.

Nevertheless, I still have some de-

murrers. In deservedly praising tape's resistance to wear, I doubt that Mr. Bird strengthens his case by arguing that discs are necessarily more susceptible. In careless practice, they are indeed, but as I've stressed before in these columns, disc and stylus wear can be rendered negligible by use of a properly adjusted professional-type pickup arm with diamond styli, and by exercising reasonable care in keeping discs dirt- and static-free. (For the last purpose, I've found the Mercury “Disc-Charger” the most satisfactory safeguard I've used to date.) Anyway, tape accessories, if not tapes themselves, are certainly subject to wear: magnetic heads wear down at about the same slow rate as a diamond stylus, while tape-transport mechanisms like disc turntables require constant maintenance and occasional replacements.

THE question of freely-re-recording commercial materials is more serious. Taping broadcasts apparently is legitimate if not done for sale, and preserving out-of-print or irreplaceable discs on tape for one's own use seems to me ethically, if not legally, defensible. But taping broadcast—or, worse, borrowed—LP's to avoid purchasing currently marketed material is plainly dubious in both its morality and legality. Fortunately, such “pirating” isn't likely to become widespread among home listeners at present, yet this problem, like that of standardized tape equalization, is sure to rank high among those which a full-grown home-tape movement must eventually solve.

Happily another grave problem—that of maintaining home tape equipments in optimum performance—seems well on its way to a practical solution, that is if tape-worms are willing to make use of such effective and convenient aids as the recently released Test Tapes put out by the Dubbings Company, famous earlier for its invaluable test disc-records.

And most encouraging of all signs of healthy development in the whole tape movement (and an augury of the better mutual enlightenment of its partisans and critics) is the open discussion of tape's basic problems and the free—even if at times over-vehement—debate over the more controversial issues involved. Tape's natural potentialities are far too great either to be ignored or distorted. If I concentrated earlier on the latter danger, it's a pleasure to return now to the former—and to acknowledge that when the best tape-worm spokesmen turn on one, they have a lot to say that even a bigoted discophile can listen to with genuine profit.

—R. D. DARRELL.