



Philharmonia and Philharmonic

THE last week of October was all Philharmonia and Philharmonic, both orchestras performing in sequence in Carnegie Hall on six of seven days. To be sure, the sound of the local one, returned from its foreign touring, was almost as familiar as one's own voice; but when the Philharmonia sounded its "A" the difference was much more than that differentiating Philharmonic from Philharmonia.

As tended by Herbert van Karajan, the visitors from London presented a sound thrice familiar from many recordings, but still arousing to hear in the altogether: peculiarly smooth, finely integrated, beautifully molded. This sound is always fully formed and vibrant, like a chime truly struck. For richness, however, the Philadelphia still stands supreme, as the Vienna Philharmonic does for warmth. That Walter Legge, who waved the wand that brought this miraculous ensemble into being, could challenge such enduring standards in a mere ten years is a tribute both to "His Master's Voice" (the recording combine involved in its existence) and His Master's Legge, Karajan himself.

The latter's programs were sensational only in their conservatism, rating Mozart's *Divertimento* in B flat (K. 287) at one extreme and Bartok's "Concerto for Orchestra" at another within limits largely non-controversial. Written for a quartet of strings and two horns, the *Divertimento* was played by perhaps thirty strings and, still, two horns. This is a perilous procedure unless the conductor is discreet, the concertmaster (who was the equivalent of a concerto to play in the middle movement) expert. Karajan and his superior string master, Manoug Parikian, qualified unequivocally.

The hornplayers who contributed so much to the success of this introductory venture were, "merely," the admirable Dennis Brain, heard here previously when he toured with the Royal Philharmonic under Beecham, and his able associate, Neill Sanders. Brain's strength is as the strength of ten, especially when he is playing softly. Together they wound their sound in and around that of the strings with a definition and purity that delighted the ear. Bolstered by other members of the section, the playing of the horn quartet was a

spectacular feature on another program, of Harty's arrangement of the Handel "Water Music." Few vocalists to be heard in the months to come will produce so secure a trill and turn as Brain and mates provided for the closing bars of the "Air." It was barely audible, but audibly perfect. Give a credit, too, for the resonant sound of James Bradshaw's tympani, which reminded that this is a musical instrument rather than a mere noisemaker.

Karajan's influence on the first and last programs (I did not hear the middle one) was almost suspect in its integrity, easy flow, and manifold mastery of the musical problems involved. These problems were related to works so diverse as Beethoven's "Pastorale," Berlioz's "Fantastique," and Debussy's "La Mer," with their vastly varied textures and tendencies. If there is an if—and there always is—it would relate to a certain objectivity, a lack of deep personal involvement with the life and breath of the scores. An exception must be made of Karajan's Bartok, which had a whiplash impact, an arousing unanimity of orchestral response. Taken altogether, one can think of only two or three conductors now active in America who could have managed the stated sequence on Karajan's level of competence.

For a repertorial detail, on behalf of those who were present and curious, the conductor's shuffling gait is neither usual nor customary. He wrenched his back several days earlier at a concert in Washington, with painful effects on locomotion. Once firmly planted on the podium he functioned about normally, though probably with a good deal of localized agony.

BETWEEN the second and third Philharmonia program Dimitri Mitropoulos presented the third act of Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra and the required number of vocal soloists. His own driving energy was frequently expressed through a sound too lean, lacking the richness appropriate to the music, with the best singing done by the subordinate personnel: the excellent Rhine Maidens—Shakeh Vatenisian, Rosalind Elias, and Herta Glaz; the able Gunther, Clifford Harvuot; and the well-meaning but vocally disorientated Guttrune, Lucine Amara.

The latter's need to sing a German text obviously found her at a disadvantage. It is also questionable whether she is spending her vocal resources wisely in working against the Wagner orchestra.

None of the principals—Ramon Vinay, Astrid Varnay, and Luben Vichey—was wholly happy in the assigned circumstances. Vinay labored his throat unmercifully in an effort to get out the tones required, while offering little in style or eloquence; Varnay drew an enormously impressive blueprint of Brünnhilde's function in the "Immolation," though she only rarely matched her ideal statement of the verbal text with a proper realization of the vocal line; and Luben Vichey sounded a more impressive Hagen on the air Sunday than he looked in the hall Thursday when he was reading the music from a printed score.

Assuming that a concert performance of Act III of "Götterdämmerung" is a reasonable project—and this effort was almost convincing—the further requirement should be that all the personnel required in the score should be provided. However, there were neither the "zwei Männer" noted for the scene of Siegfried's death (Harvuot-Gunther filled in), nor the chorus of vassals needed to accuse Hagen of his treachery. Likewise, the last, important vocal occurrence of Hagen was set aside in favor of a purely orchestral proclamation of the closing moments of the whole "Ring." In these moments Mitropoulos did not operate within reasonable limits of self-control, breadth of statement, or comprehension of the vast plan with which he was concerned (inferentially) to mark him as a true Wagnerian mind. Too much was impulsive, shrill, and volatile to achieve a satisfactory totality of effect, though the orchestra did its work superbly.

—IRVING KOLODIN.



Back to Offenbach

By HENRY HEWES

ON MONDAY evening New York's number-one repertory company opens its seventy-first season with its 212th new production, Jacques Offenbach's "Les Contes d'Hoffman," really three operas in one. The various people concerned seem delightfully relaxed, taking the whole business in stride. For instance, Roberta Peters—who will play the leading role of the doll in the first conte—was permitted to miss one entire week of the already much-too-short rehearsal period, a dispensation permissible only because she was, in the operatic tradition, note-perfect in her role when she reported for duty for the first time. Likewise the opera's director, Cyril Ritchard, has had to sandwich his task in between his directing chores with the Theatre Guild's Broadway production of "The Heavenly Twins" and some immediately forthcoming TV commitments. This he has been able to do because he is the kind of director who knows exactly what he wants and wastes little time onstage. The same pattern continues all the way down the line. Scene-designer Rolf Gerard has a production of "The Merry Widow" opening in Chicago two days after the Met opening, not to mention his one-man show of paintings which begins November 18 at the Galerie Chalette on West 57th Street. And eighty-year-old Pierre Monteux is scheduled to lead the New York Philharmonic in a concert three days after he conducts the opening performance of "Hoffman."

If some of the Met's 110 artists are treating "Hoffman" as a *fait accompli*, Mr. Bing and the Met's technical staff are already thinking about the production in the past tense. At the moment the Met's general manager, who since coming over six years ago has learned not to treat each opera as a life-or-death enterprise, is already planning for the 1956-57 season. All this doesn't mean that everyone is overconfident. But a well-organized repertory company does not live or die on any one production, even a "first night." As Mr. Bing explains it, "Our subscriptions this season are up \$12,000 over last. I would guess that this is because the people who came to last year's productions were pleased not with one particular

opera but with the standard that was maintained."

Since a repertory company can think in terms of maintaining and improving standards rather than in terms of fashioning hits, all its gains tend to be cumulative. For instance, while Ritchard did a superb job two seasons back with Rossini's "Barber," Mr. Bing regards that production as only part of what the Met got from Ritchard. Just as important was the general training he gave Met singers, who became better-equipped actors for all their succeeding roles. That is one reason why Mr. Ritchard is doing "Hoffman" instead of this year's second opera, "Don Pasquale," which is similar in style to the "Barber." It is good for Mr. Ritchard to work with an operatic problem quite different from what he has already mastered, and it is good for the company to have the advantage of learning what he has to teach them in a different style. One of the most amusing moments in rehearsal came when Mr. Ritchard had the problem of getting fifty people to exit up a flight of stairs in a hurry without the awkward and ludicrous effect you would get if this mass of mostly untrained personnel huffed and puffed their way up, strenuously pumping shoulders and arms. "You do not run," explained the graceful director, who began his theatrical career as a dancer. "You fly!"

Ritchard is of the school of "low-brow" directors who feels that everything should be done to make opera more understandable and dramatic. He has plumped for having the Met do "Hoffman" in English, and has even convinced M. Monteux. While it was too late to do anything about it this

season, the Met may have it translated for next year's. Martial Singher, the only non-American in the "Hoffman" cast, thinks it may work very well in this case, although he warns against trying it with all operas. "I once heard 'Lohengrin' in Italian and it was laughable," he points out. "There is a difference between 'Ich Liebe Dich,' which is mystic, and 'Io t'amo,' which is voluptuous."

TO make the present "Hoffman" clearer Ritchard has made such minor alterations as changing "les sbires!" to "la police!" (Maestro Monteux jokingly suggested "the cops!"). He has also tried by directorial suggestion to convey the similar aspects in the three loves of Hoffman. The fact that the way in which the dialogue is delivered is dictated by the music doesn't bother him too much. "I'd say the dialogue in Shaw is pretty much frozen, too," says the man who directed the successful production of "Misalliance" here three years ago. Ritchard adds accents in many ways. He takes a hand in the selecting of props and special effects. He brings dancers into scenes with the singing chorus, who by doing such things as running over tabletops or reclining gracefully on the pillows of a Venice bordello give a flavor to the scenes. He encourages a physical exaggeration of characterization. And he is always thinking of little things the actor can do easily, while he is singing, to clarify relationships with the other actors.

Ritchard has collaborated closely with scene-designer Rolf Gerard. The latter has worked towards achieving a romantic atmosphere. This has been done by cutting down on the amount of general light and focussing spotlights on small specific areas which will be highlighted against a foggy background. Mr. Gerard has also used colors audaciously to give a characteristic mood to each of the three sequences. The prologue he has painted in rich browns and reds. The ballroom scene has been carried out in pink, because Hoffman is supposed to be seeing it all through pink glasses. The Venetian episode is in Renaissance style, with much red to indicate passion and a deep blue background to suggest a very romantic night. The final act is elegaic and reminiscent, the style taken from Biedermeier and the color mainly a jade green. Mr. Gerard has also designed the tremendously large number of colorful costumes that will be necessary for three separate tales, and 40 per cent of the total budget for the four new productions to be staged this season has been spent on making the scenery and costumes.

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Peters and Ritchard in rehearsal.