



## Festival in Bergen, "Peer Gynt" in Oslo

BERGEN, NORWAY.

**H**OWEVER it ranks otherwise, the festival in Norway's hill-girt, fjord-slashed Bergen has one special distinction—you can go to an evening concert shielding your eyes from the bright sun to the west and return hotelward (if you have one) by the same heavenly orb, without having passed the time between doing anything but listening to music. This tends to give a slightly unreal aspect to the whole experience, especially when a socially-conscious segment of the Ber-genese chooses to wear black ties or evening gowns. Even at midnight the sky still has a silvery kind of twilight glow rather than full darkness.

In view of all this there would be decidedly more local color were the current base of musical activity something instead of a converted cinema. In the interests of acoustical amenities the whole stage of the "Konsertpaleet" has been lined with plywood (or some similar matter) and the sound if sharply bright is still considered an improvement on that of a few years back. Unquestionably, Bergen will have a better musical tone, so to speak, when agreement is reached on the design for an Edvard Grieg Memorial Hall, for which funds and a site are available. Nineteen hundred and sixty is the target date, and the red carpet literally rolled out for Crown Prince Olaf to attend this year's opening ceremonies as ranking guest will then have more than a symbolic significance.

When that happy day comes it may also be hoped that Bergen will add to its limited hotel space something rewarding to the outlander. It is considered a sign of Bergen's popularity that space is at a premium (some of it not worth the going price), but there is little justification to urge a visit from America under such delusions of grandeur.

However, if you are a positive melo-maniac there is interest, even pleasure, in the work of the local orchestra directed by Carl Garaguly. Hungarian by birth, German by training, Swedish by performing experience, and now Norwegian by adoption, Garaguly has converted this patchwork past into a persuasive platform for his present activities. In the opening afternoon ceremony (really a concert of an hour and a half dotted with speeches) Garaguly did especially well with the amusing "Bergensiana" of Johann

Halvorsen, as well as brief works of a ceremonial character by Sparre Olsen, Waldemar Thrane, and Sverre Jordan.

As a curiosity item, the evening program (to be followed by others involving David Oistrakh, the BBC Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent, etc.) offered a première: a concerto for orchestra and "Harden-gar" fiddle by Geirr Tveitt, a resident of the area. The instrument (which takes its name from the famous fjord hard by Bergen) has some kinship with the viola d'amore, eight strings, and a nasal tone. It is also thicker than the usual violin and in the case of the one used by Magne Manheim in this performance richly inlaid, belly and back. The work seemed to me over-scored for the thin-sounding "solo" instrument and not laden with appetizing matter, but the serving was warmly applauded by the audience.

Rather more apparently excellent was the piano-playing of Grant Johannesen (Utah born of Norwegian extraction) in—what else?—the A minor concerto of Bergen's favorite favorite-son. For an American to venture Grieg in Bergen would be something like Victor Borge playing the "Rhapsody in Blue" in Carnegie Hall, but Johannesen's fluency, musicianship, and warmly communicative musical nature spoke for themselves. The evening also contained Eivind Groven's "Hjalar-ljoda" overture (a genuinely jolly piece), the lightly fanciful "Escapades" of a composer bearing the awesome name of Edvard Hagerup Bull (thus paying tribute to both of Bergen's celebrated musicians), and the second of Grieg's "Peer Gynt" suites.

**E**AST or west, there is little doubt that Grieg is the composer Norway loves best. With a celebration commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Henrik Ibsen's death (1906) currently occupying the attention of the Nation-

altheatret, it was a comparatively easy thing to exchange the coastal barrier of Bergen for the inland charms of Oslo, there to find a full-length presentation of "Peer Gynt." (An exacting all-day trip by rail, it is merely an hour as the SAS flies, several times a day.) Here was all the incidental music of which we customarily hear only snatches, and here, too, is the production which America will see next season under the house-flag reading S. Hurok.

Typical of the Nationaltheatret, it is before all else a company effort in which every role from smallest to largest is mimed or spoken, danced, or sung with distinction, style, and finesse. Of singular (or perhaps it should be plural) interest was the playing of the young Peer Gynt by Toralv Maurstad, son of the able Alfred Maurstad who not only directed the production but also plays the older Peer Gynt. There is thus the most believable kind of unity in the key role, not matched perhaps since the days when knighthood (or the Schildkrauts) was in flower. Toralv is a handsome blond fellow with the lithe limbs and the spirited tongue to make Part I absorbing; the older Maurstad a master of the acting craft who shades the cynicism of the aging adventurer with a tinge of humanity.

Performed, of course, in Ibsen's native tongue, there is naturally the question of the language barrier. I found it initially impenetrable but as the action progressed less and less a factor of prime importance. When one stops listening for words and follows, instead, intonation and gesture, timing and coordination on the stage, the current of the drama is altogether compelling. That is, it is until the action slows down in Part II and the philosophic observations of Ibsen take over. This last hour of a performance that begins at 7:30 and runs to nearly 11:30 (with a twenty-minute break) is unquestionably taxing to the non-native attention. Moreover, it is just in this space of time that the music thins out, and the attention is concentrated on the stage and the word. The stage throughout is poetically dressed by Kai Fjell's décor, and the word is never slighted; but the music is played too much like a "classic"—that is, with a faith in its complete ability to make its way unaided. Arvid Fladmoe's conducting is no more than well routinized, the playing by the thirty or so musicians in the pit of the stately National Theatre many levels below the stage—artistically as well as physically. Let us hope American audiences are offered something better when the production—an admirable one in most other respects—visits American shores.

—IRVING KOLODIN.



## MID-MONTH RECORDINGS



# OKAY, COMRADES, LET'S JAZZ IT UP

## *Russia Finds the Beat*

A great gate at Moscow, vintage 1937.

By RICHARD HANSER

**I**N ALL the scurry and scramble over the abrupt deflation of Stalin, a more than minor glint of illumination on the changing Soviet attitude toward the outside world has been generally overlooked. It may not seem like much that the Party line on American jazz has also been radically reversed, but in the long haul it is not necessarily the immediate headline event that has the most significance. There is already evidence that millions of Russians are taking the fragmentation of the Stalin myth with hardly more than a "Well, I'll be damned," but there is as yet no telling what effect a prolonged and uninhibited exposure to "Tiger Rag" and "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans" will ultimately have on the murky slavic soul.

After all, as Plato pointed out in "The Republic," "One law our guardians must keep in force, never letting it be overlooked and guarding it with more care than all the rest. We have to keep new sorts of music away from us as a danger to society; because forms and rhythms in music are never changed without producing changes in the most important political forms and ways. . . ."

Soviet fundamentalists have always sensed the threat to their system latent in the alien and exotic rhythms of America, and through the years some of their heaviest propaganda artillery has been wheeled up against jazz as one of the most intolerable an impermissible of all the forms of self-expression. Maxim Gorki was among the first to denounce it as "a capitalist perversion," and his almost hysterical description of a jazz band in action has been reprinted in the

Soviet press many times since: "Wild screaming, hissing, rattling, wailing, moaning, cackling . . . bestial cries . . . the squeal of a brass pig, crying jackasses . . . one conjures up an orchestra of madmen, sexual maniacs, led by a man-stallion beating time with an enormous phallus."

The persistent attack on jazz as musical barbarism, however, has its roots in a deep-seated, and frankly expressed, fear of its political effects which the Communists have always assumed to be far more profound than is usually suspected here at home. *Contemporanul* of Bucharest, for example, accurately expressed the official line by branding it "a means of spiritual poisoning and stultification of the masses," and Professor Ernst H. Meyer, publisher of *Musik und Gesellschaft* in the Soviet Zone of Germany, has chimed in with the solemn warning that, "It would be wrong to fail to recognize the dangerous role of American jazz in the preparation for war. Boogie-woogie is a canal through which the poison of Americanism is channelled, threatening to numb the minds of the workers."

The theme has been harped on endlessly in both the Soviet and satellite press; it automatically became a major motif of Party propaganda whenever the Communists took over another country. In Prague *Kulturni Prace* introduced a clinical variation by alerting the unsuspecting Czechs to the fact that "jazz disturbs the nervous system of the dancer in such a way that he is then prepared for the role assigned to him by Wall Street, namely to become good cannon fodder." In China the abolition of jazz from the night spots of Shanghai was made part of the campaign to aid North Korea win the war. "Entertain-

ers now understand," wrote the Communist journal *Ta Kung Pao*, "that [opposition to jazz] is necessary in strengthening their studies and striving for ideological remoulding. . . ."

Whatever else may be wrong with Communist propaganda, it is far too canny and well-organized to waste time attacking a menace which does not exist. The thunderbolts hurled so often at Dixieland would be entirely senseless if there were nothing on the receiving end. What is aimed at is the astonishing appeal of American jazz for millions inside Russia and throughout the satellite sphere—a phenomenon which the deep thinkers of Agitprop have never been able to understand or cope with.

**W**HEN the great Sidney Bechet and his five-man colored combo introduced jazz to Moscow in 1925 his success, according to an ear-witness, was "instantaneous and incredible." He played to packed houses several times a day for months, and the audiences, says the same witness, "were so aroused that they stamped their feet, shouted, and applauded in a frenzy." A music student named Alexander Tsfasman attended one of Sidney's jam sessions and promptly resigned from the Moscow Conservatory to organize his own jazz orchestra. He won for himself "a tremendous following among all classes of Soviet citizens," and made American hot music a national rage. Two-beat bands sprang up in hundreds of cities, towns, and villages. Tsfasman became such a popular idol that at a time of galloping socialization he and his band remained a uniquely free enterprise, paid no attention to the rules and restrictions clamped on ordinary Soviet citizens, and made sinful amounts