



## SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

### Opera Week at the Movies

ONE NIGHT a few weeks ago, in a New York office building that houses several small projection rooms, it was possible to choose between two previews of Mozart's "Don Giovanni." On the ninth floor was a three-hour presentation filmed on the stage of the Salzburg Opera; on the fourth floor an abbreviated version featuring stars of the Vienna Opera. A few days later, on the fourth floor again, an Italo-Japanese version of Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" was run off—Italian singers, Japanese cast. The same afternoon Warner Brothers previewed Mario Lanza in "Serenade," the story of an opera singer all but ruined by his nymphomaniacal patroness, his gloomy progress punctuated by half a dozen operatic arias. Around the corner a sumptuous Russian production of "Boris Goudonov" had just begun its run. The week concluded with an Italian-made tribute to "The House of Ricordi," the publishers of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi, and Puccini—and illustrated, of course, with generous excerpts from the works of each.

I found myself wondering, at the conclusion of this musical binge, not only at the sudden profusion of operatic films but also at the curiously unsatisfactory esthetic experience that seeing an opera in the movies provides. It is not merely a matter of the recording—several of the casts and most of the recording jobs were first-rate. But without questioning the value of having some visual transcript of these works to present where "live" opera companies could hardly afford to tread (which is one reason why the Russians and Italians make so many of them) the pleasure of hearing the music is too often negated by visuals that are striving to be "cinematic." The conventions of the movie and the conventions of the opera stage are poles apart, and this week's pictures have all but convinced me that never the twain shall meet. At least not in conventional grand opera.

The two "Don Giovannis" seem to set the extremes. In the Salzburg version there is no attempt to conceal the fact that it is a stage production. The camera does some zooming around, there are close-ups and long-shots, but primarily it is a stage event—and without the electricity of the singers' presence, without the sense of participating in a one-time happen-

ing, a very boring event it soon becomes. It has little merit beyond preserving the entire opera as conducted by the late Wilhelm Furtwängler and sung by Lisa Della Casa, Erna Berger, and Cesare Siepi. The Viennese "Giovanni," on the other hand (presented as "Don Juan" to avoid confusion), attempts an adaptation, racing the camera through crowded streets, down palace corridors and great flights of stairs, trying to impose on arias and set pieces some of the movement, some of the action commonly associated with the motion-picture form. But the opera resists. The Don must climb to Donna Anna's chamber singing away at the top of his voice while the crowds below find nothing amiss. When, at the finale, the flames mount higher about the doomed Don Giovanni he sings an aria instead of running for his life. At the Met one accepts these as conventions and limitations of the stage. In the film one cannot, simply because they are limitations that the motion picture has its own ways of surmounting. Neither version, it should be noted, has been particularly well recorded; the Vienna group, however, with Alfred Poell as the Don and Annie Felbermayer singing beautifully as both Zerlina and Donna Anna at least has the advantage of consistent sound levels.

This is possible because "Don Juan"—like "Madame Butterfly" and the operatic excerpts included in "House of Ricordi"—share the growing tendency to use joint casts, one to act and one to sing the roles. (Remember Robert Helpmann's magnificent "baritone" in "Tales of Hoffman"?) Since most musical numbers are pre-recorded anyway, the performers on the screen matching their lips to arias recorded under the optimum conditions of a sound stage, there is no good reason why this matching should not be done by more accomplished—or more decorative—actors. This technique works out especially well in the case of "Butterfly," where Orietta Moscucci and Anna Maria Canali sing gloriously as Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki, while the roles are enacted by a skilled troupe of Japanese players. Once one recovers from the initial shock of hearing flawless Italian pour from Oriental lips the effect is quite agreeable—especially with such a charming Butterfly as Kaoru Yachigusa and such an able Goro as

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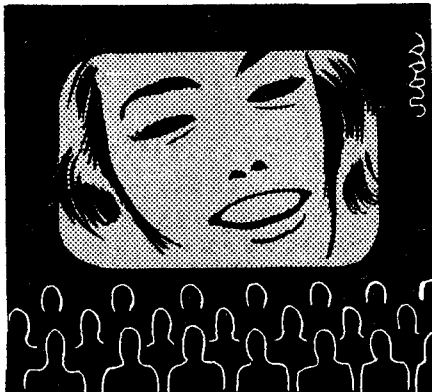
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Kiyoshi Takagi (voice by Paolo Caroli). Carmine Gallone, the veteran director of Italian opera films, has struck a fairly happy medium between the two "Giovannis" by presenting this opera neither as merely a stage work nor forcing onto it an overly "cinematic" treatment: his camera is discreetly functional. And yet, as aria followed aria, I noted with some dismay that I felt no desire to applaud, no desire to check the flow of the story to savor a particularly exquisite moment of music. It was, in short, an experience far removed from enjoying opera in the theatre.

If any opera should lend itself to filming Moussorgsky's "Boris Goudonov" would seem to be it, not only because of the opulence of its settings, its huge choruses and abundance of plot, but more importantly because its music advances the dramatic story with a minimum of arias. In preparing this screen version the Russians have taken full advantage of the camera's ability to open out the action, to bring in crowds of singers (and show in the process the faces of the people of Russia that Moussorgsky was writing about), to use real palaces, forests, and fields. As a result, the film looks at times very much like Eisenstein's "Alexander Nevsky," with the resonant lines being sung instead of declaimed. And yet, for all the felicities of camera movement, color, and pageantry—and excellent performances by the singers of the Bolshoi Opera—that went into the making of this film, such sequences as the Garden Duet and the Mad Scene remind one forcibly of their theatrical origin and of the static, artificial nature of opera itself.

Perhaps the best way to handle opera on film is that used in "House of Ricordi" and "Serenade," where no attempt is made to conceal the stage, where the singers have all been very skilfully pre-recorded, but where the scenes are merely musical interludes in a movie story. I don't really know. Clearly, there are many ways to film opera—but I have yet to see an opera film. —ARTHUR KNIGHT.



## TV AND RADIO

### Sixty Per Cent Entertainment

**A**NY man named Robert E. Lee can be expected to champion lost causes, but the one on the FCC has gone positively romantic. He imagines he can inflame the American people by saying that over a considerable period of time checked by him the average TV hour consisted of more than 40 per cent commercials, less than 60 per cent entertainment.

*During the past few weeks I have made some notes on the 60 per cent.*

•• The sweetest, most disarming comedian on the air is Jimmy Durante, and at least once out of three times he appears on what someone certainly called "a great idea for a show." What? Well, there'll be a mix-up and Jimmy and Charles Laughton will be scheduled for appearances at Town Hall at the same time!

Laughton first appeared in a hotel room, making tea by taking a teabag which he wore round his neck and replacing it under his pajama-top after he had dipped it. To cue in the later mixup, Jimmy was assigned the same room and shared the bed. He had, he said, "insomniosis." He counted sheep—and was as enchanting as ever. Then the reading at Town Hall ("a dilemma," Jimmy calls the situation). Laughton read "The Psalm of Life" (in part) and Jimmy recited "Hickory, Dickory, Dock."

After a few more bits a neighbor of mine came in and the rest was blessed silence.

•• Jack Benny is the most skilful comedian on the air and two out of three times, at least, there is no "good idea for a show" (except the one about letting Benny do his stuff) and the shows are good. Around Lincoln's Birthday he said Lincoln was his kind of guy—walked twelve miles to escape a three-cent fine on a library book. He also celebrated his own birth, thirty-nine years ago: when the doctor slapped him he was arrested for assault. The gags were all there, all old, all easy.

The big scene was with Frances (Mrs. Edgar) Bergen, with whom Benny rehearsed a love-scene, imitating William Holden, who was in the audience. While Benny embraced her she kept looking at Holden, then Holden came up and showed Benny how and Benny observed the limp arm of ecstasy and took an eyepiece to examine the diamond ring on her

hand, taking it off her finger while she was rapt in romance—but she got it back. More than apathetically acceptable—really attractive.

•• Bob Hope is the most irritating comedian on the air and his appearances are infrequent. He kinescoped a big show in London before an English audience, and there were huge laughs and wild applause at the mention, humorous to be sure, of Senator McCarthy. As in many other recent cases, I was more oppressed at the thought that the laughter was spontaneous than by the suspicion it was canned. There was British applause, too, when Hope said something about Cleveland needing good pitchers!

Fernandel was the big-name guest. He felt Hope's nose to make sure it was real. After a parody of the usual flattering remarks Fernandel asked for his fee. "Back to the Marshall Plan," said Hope. It wasn't any funnier when you saw it.

•• Sam Levinson said "a genius is a stupid kid with very happy grandparents," which is good and reminds me of the New England definition "A lad is a boy with a man's hand on his head." Then he made a lot of jokes about progressive education: "Look how nice he holds the hammer."

Memo to all TV comics (and others): more than 90 per cent of all the illiterate and the un-educated come from non-progressive schools.

•• Ethel and Albert are wonderful. They used a running gag in a recent show. Albert, digging a hole to plant a spruce tree, finds what is taken for an Aztec head. Unheard of in this locality, scientists appear, broadcasts are made, Albert swells in importance—until the head is identified as a copy.

But right from the start Ethel said it was too late to plant the spruce—the ground was frozen. And from the children who come to see the head, through the local scientists, and up to the head of the Museum of Natural History this theme bubbles up, as naturally and spontaneously as gags do in a really well-written script.

•• The greatest break broadcasters ever had was when critics began to concentrate their fire on the commercials. It's the other 60 per cent that's important. —GILBERT SELDES.