

OPERA FOR EAR ALONE

By HERBERT WEINSTOCK

IN A world supplying few superb performances of the greatest operas, an ardent operamane must eagerly accept other operatic pleasures. One of these, of course, is that of seeing the same operas many times, thus being able to contrast the interpretations of different conductors, singers, and stage-designers. Another of these secondary pleasures is, or should be, that of hearing for the first time a new opera or the singing of an opera known by name and perhaps reputation, but previously unexperienced. I have just listened to recordings of four operas I had never previously heard. I grasped at them eagerly. I should have been more selective and less hopeful: the four recordings supply a very complex mixed bag.

The four operas, in chronological order by the dates of their original stagings, are: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Le Devin du Village" (1752, never played at the Metropolitan); Mozart's "La Finta Semplice" (1769, never played at the Metropolitan); Giacomo Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots" (1836, last heard at the Metropolitan during the 1914-1915 season); and Peter Cornelius's "Der Barbier von Bagdad" (1858, last heard at the Metropolitan in the 1927-1928 season).

Rousseau's "The Village Soothsayer" (Angel 35421, \$4.98) would never lead an uninformed listener to suspect it of being a philosopher's work; nor need it be categorized as fair music-making for a literary man. In fact, it is a delicious *opera buffa* made of charming, sweetly pastoral music wedded with great expertness to its French text. Little wonder that, after its *première* before Louis XV and Mme. de Pompadour at Fontainebleau in 1752 and its second *première* in Paris shortly after, it became exceedingly popular and for a long time remained so. As heard in this nicely calculated and scrupulously honest recording, it has attributes of a fine Spring day in the country. Louis de Froment leads the chamber orchestra and soloists, really leads them, in all of the right directions. Janine Michaeu charmingly conveys the simplicity, coquetry, and stylized infatuation of the shepherdess Colette; Nicolai Gedda is similarly

excellent as the erring Colin; and Michel Roux as the Soothsayer manages to project the bumbling humor of his role without ever mistaking himself for Dr. Dulcamara. The useful booklet included with the record provides the entire French text and a fragrantly antique English translation by no less than Dr. Charles Burney, who knew Rousseau well.

The recording of Mozart's "The Pretended Simpleton" (Epic SC 6021, \$7.96) is very brightly performed. Bernhard Paumgartner conducts the Camerata Academica of the Salzburg Mozarteum and the seven soloists, of whom only Alois Pernestorfer (the Don Cassandro) was previously known to me by name. He and Dorothea Siebert, who sings the Hungarian baroness, Rosina, are very good indeed; none of the singers falls disaffectingly below the level of enjoyability. But the recording gives no grounds for appraising Mozart's adolescent opera. The recitative—a matter of the first importance in the continuity of *opera buffa*—is missing. Worse, as Dr. Paumgartner himself blandly writes: "It goes *without saying* [italics mine—H. W.] that a few cuts had to be effected here and there in the arias. . . ." What Epic has allowed us, in sober fact, is no more than a bouquet of arias, duets, and other concerted numbers from "La Finta Semplice," not the opera itself.

But what Dr. Paumgartner has done to Mozart, whose reputation is now safe beyond the reach of such editing, is very minor if set beside what has been done in Westminster OPW 1204, (\$7.96) to poor Giacomo Meyerbeer—whose present reputation is a wreck beached far from the water's edge. Westminster has had the courtesy to label the album "Abridged"—which, though an abysmal understatement, is greatly preferable to the false claims implied on many album labels from many companies. In this "abridged" version of "The Huguenots" the first act is not represented at all. Arias, duets, and other ensembles are omitted and cut to shreds. Often the whole musical texture is flagrantly misrepresented. In some duets one of the voice parts is omitted; an orchestral passage described in the accompanying booklet as "Symphonic Interlude: The Feast" shows up in the score as only the accompaniment to a gourmets' chorus beginning

"Bonheur de la table"! Jean Allain conducts without insight or authority the Padeloup Orchestra, the Académie Chorale de Paris, and a collection of seven very dim stars. Most of all composers, Meyerbeer requires technical brilliance for the mere maintenance of life. Here he is left dead and perhaps in travesty, his robes dirty and askew, his crown toppled off.

YET the best is last. Peter Cornelius's "The Barber of Bagdad" on Angel 3553 (\$10.96) provides genuine, if minor, musical pleasure. Erich Leinsdorf conducts stylishly the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus of six soloists of unwavering excellence: Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Margiana), Grace Hoffman (Bostana), Oskar Czerwenka (the Barber), Gerhard Unger (the Cadi), Nicolai Gedda (Nureddin), and Hermann Prey (the Caliph). The attractive pseudo-Oriental cryings of the three *muezzins* are exquisitely handled by Eberhard Wächter, August Jaresch, and Rudolf Crist. Cornelius himself turns out to be a sort of Teutonic Rossini, "The Barber of Bagdad" a German equivalent of "L'Italiana in Algeri." Sentiment and amorous lyricism are thicker and more pervasive than in most Italian *opera buffa*, but never so whipped up as to cloy. The text is frequently alight with genuine fun, some of the rhyming being worthy of W. S. Gilbert or Cole Porter, as in the hilarious canonic trio in Act II. The recording begins with Cornelius's original brief B minor Overture; a separated band at the end of the last record side gives us also the second, D major, Overture, which Cornelius wrote at Liszt's suggestion—and which Liszt probably orchestrated.

If you enjoy lush melody, expert orchestral writing, swift verbal humor, and some rowdy fun, hear "Der Barbier von Bagdad"; or "Le Devin du Village" if you can sometimes take your musical pleasure simply and without intensity. "La Finta Semplice," as recorded, will supply you with several Mozartean inspirations of not quite the first order. From the recording of "Les Huguenots" you will get nothing, I am afraid, but a sense of wonder that so botched a version so poorly played and sung should have seemed to anyone worth either recording or issuing. Let us hope that a promised complete recording of "Les Huguenots" will be really complete (in French), and that it will have seven first-magnitude stars, a great conductor, and a sense of terrible theatrical urgency. With anything less, I am afraid, Meyerbeer will always taste like ashes in the mouth.

Recordings in Review

A Prokofiev Premiere

RAVEL: *Sonata*. HINDEMITH: *Sonata No. 3*. PROKOFIEV: *Sonata (opus 115)*, *Melodies for Violin, opus 35a*. Joseph Szigeti, violin, with Carlo Bussotti, piano. Columbia ML 5178, \$3.98.

JOSEPH SZIGETI'S devotion to the violin and its literature, old and new, is hardly a novel fact, but it has rarely yielded so much in so little space. Whether in the suave Ravel, the thewy Hindemith, the rigorous Prokofiev of the unaccompanied sonata, or the more relaxed one of the early "Melodies," Szigeti is at one with their stylistic problems and the difficulties posed by the writing.

Each of the works is not only presented with a full sense of the values it contains, but also in a way to establish it as worth hearing again and again. In the Ravel, a minor classic of that Minor master, this is no revelation, for it has enjoyed a connoisseur's esteem since it was completed in 1927. However, Szigeti shows us in the Hindemith of 1935 and the Prokofiev of 1947 that consequential music is being added to the violinist's repertory decade by decade.

My interest is focused on the "new" Prokofiev which Szigeti sponsored in his series of contemporary sonatas heard last year in Zurich, New York, and elsewhere. Why it has waited ten years for an American introduction on discs is baffling, for it is in the grand line of works for unaccompanied violin from Bach to Ysaÿe

and Bartok. Cocoonlike, it is spun from the threads of its own stuff, sustained by a powerful sense of melodic line and the regard for the instrument's capacities Prokofiev has demonstrated so well in his concerti and earlier sonatas.

Almost as newsworthy as the Prokofiev premiere is the skilful microphoning of Szigeti's sound. It has everything wanted in clarity, without accentuating its rough edges. Indeed, it is revealing to note how well the *ponticello* (on the bridge) effects in Ravel are distinguished from ordinary bowing. Bussotti does his work well, in the spirit of those admirable partners Szigeti has previously sought out (Foldes, Magaloff, and Hambro among others).

Mazurkas by Magaloff

CHOPIN: *Mazurkas Nos. 1 to 50*. Nikita Magaloff, piano. London LLA-53, \$11.94.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in recording history a company other than RCA Victor (or its former affiliate, HMV) has ventured into the field of a Chopin issue covering three discs. Previously we have had Etudes complete on a single LP, or Nocturnes on two, but London's major status is attested no less by the appearance of this thoroughgoing effort than by the complete sequence of Beethoven sonatas for cello and piano. I am sure that all (RCA Victor included) will look on this "Share the work" movement with favor as something that can only promise well for the phonograph.

The immediate question is, however: how does Magaloff's achievement measure to the standards that prevail in this literature—namely, those created by Artur Rubinstein? The answer is not difficult to come by, or to express: only partially. Serious it certainly is, and painstaking, also musical, tasteful, and all the good things that can be said short of the ultimate. There are few sins of commission (unless caution and a slight excess of thought can be considered in that category), but much that could have been done is left undone.

I refer especially to such matters as rhythmic accentuation, dynamic contrast, melodic malleability, and emotional coloration. Magaloff tends to be a purist in most of these considerations, limiting himself to small helpings of each. Chopin, I am afraid,

requires the gourmet approach, in which more gusto and less tonal asceticism prevail. The latter works (on sides 5 and 6) have more of the wanted freedom of impulse, but it is somewhat belated as far as the whole sequence is concerned. The presentation is chronological, which is an acceptable choice among several possibilities. I don't think, in this particular case, it affects the final results (with their lack of interpretative variety) very much. The reproduction is all it should be.

Otterloo Coming Up

BEETHOVEN: "*The Creatures of Prometheus*." Willem van Otterloo conducting the Hague Philharmonic Orchestra. Epic LC 3366, \$3.98.

THANKS TO EPIC'S determined program on behalf of native Dutch artists (the Holland-based Philips Company originates this catalogue) Willem van Otterloo now has a score of LP recordings in his name. And thanks to Van Otterloo's determined usage of this opportunity, his name now has considerably more meaning than it did when I heard him conduct the opening concert of a Holland Festival half a dozen years ago. This was a not very suitable program in a particularly unsuitable hall in the Hague. The result was more of a blight than a benefit for him, personally.

Six years and two dozen LPs later Van Otterloo impresses one as among the ablest younger European conductors in the bracket below the one occupied by Karajan and van Beinum. Whether it was the recent Mahler No. 4 or Morton Gould's "Spirituals," a Bruckner Fourth of several years ago or accompaniments for various concerti, his name has come to suggest sound musical work. A little stolid, perhaps, but always with a thorough knowledge of the score in hand, and a firm understanding that it is more important than its interpreter.

His latest venture is also his most successful. Beethoven's "Prometheus" music has always enjoyed a special affection with those who know it, but the opportunities to hear more than the overture have been limited. Van Otterloo does the total ballet sequence of sixteen sections, with the final variations (later elaborated by Beethoven into his "Eroica" symphony finale) as a proper climax to the whole. I do not contend that each of them is an indispensable example of the greater Beethoven, but together they give us an insight into his conception of the ethical in music. There are, in various aspects of the "Pro-



Magaloff—"serious, musical, tasteful."