



—Pic.

A SCHOENBERG DISC-COURSE-II

By KURT LIST

THE opera "Moses and Aaron," to Schoenberg's own text, represents a milestone in the composer's development of quite another order, in that its prime effect is philosophical rather than esthetic. It was intended as a three-act opera but only two acts were finished, the third act being a torso in libretto form. (As late as 1950 Schoenberg wrote in a letter, "It is not entirely impossible that I should finish the third act within a year.") Its creation occupied Schoenberg from about 1929 on. The first two acts were finished in score in 1932. It is these that are heard on Columbia K3L241, \$17.98.

From 1915 on Schoenberg had been occupied with ideas from a similar sphere, the oratorios "Jacob's Ladder," of which the text is completed but only about eighty measures are performable, and "Death Dance of Principles," of which the text is completed, and "The Biblical Way."

It is perhaps significant that Sigmund Freud, a contemporary of Schoenberg, like him an Austrian Jew residing in Vienna and a seminal point in his field, was occupied with similar ideas which culminated in "Moses and Monotheism" in the Thirties. Undoubtedly the thoughts of both men were directed into these channels by the growing German and Central-European antisemitism. With Schoenberg this led even to the open gesture of return to Judaism in a public ceremony in Paris in 1933

(he had left the Jewish faith and been converted to Protestantism in 1892 at the age of eighteen).

Nevertheless, it would be amiss, as some Jewish writers (most notably Peter Gradenwitz in a recent article, November 1957, *Commentary*) have attempted, to classify "Moses and Aaron" as a Jewish opera. Its central theme has universal quality. It is hung on the peg of an Old Testament story but this makes it no more Jewish than the scenic setting makes "Madama Butterfly" Japanese.

What occupied Schoenberg's mind is, of course, primarily of topical nature. His contention is that a people as a whole is not a thinking body but a conglomeration of sentiment and emotion. To fulfill its destiny it must be led not by the abstruse theoretician but the man of action who is the connecting link between the idea necessary for the direction of the fulfillment and the expediency that converts the idea into reality. Since the necessarily dogmatic and uncompromising nature of the abstract idea contravenes its taking shape in reality a conflict ensues out of which destiny evolves. Thus, born of the necessity that man must both think and live, a dichotomy of idea and action is set up against the background of an innocent and manipulated people who are both beneficiaries and victims of the results of the conflict.

This problem, if viewed as one between leadership, acquiescence to same, and relation to dogma, was highly topical in the political after-

math of World War I. Its actuality increased after the first two acts of "Moses and Aaron" were finished and its political importance has not decreased to this day.

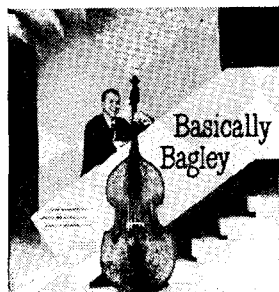
But simply as antagonism between thought and deed it is also significant on another plane. Every artist knows the conflicts that present themselves in the creation of a work of art from its ideal conception in the brain to the final bringing down on paper, canvas, the stage or whatever. The conflict between the idea, pure and hard as rock, and its material realization is one which has frustrated many great minds (one need only remember the sketchbooks of Beethoven, Brahms and his penchant for constant revision, or Mahler who never ceased to reorchestrate his symphonies practically after every public hearing). Thus the theme of "Moses and Aaron" must have been close to Schoenberg not only on the social but also, if simplified, on the creative level. Here the opera gains universality and aspires to be an absolute work of art beyond all topicality.

In its concrete application the problem is given as conflict between the two brothers, Moses, the fanatic of the idea, and Aaron, the man of action. Both love their people, but Moses would rather have them destroyed than compromise with the Law, while Aaron is willing to water down the latter in order to preserve the race. The situation is summed up in Aaron's declamation about the rod, "In Moses's hand a rigid rod: this, the law. In my own hand the most supple of serpents: discretion." And later in a summing up at the end of the second act, Aaron says, "I love this humble folk. I live just for them and want to sustain them." Moses: "If the idea wills it. My love is for my idea. I live just for it." Aaron: "You also would have loved this people, had you only seen how they lived when they dared to see and feel and hope. No folk is faithful unless it feels."

IN THE final scene of which only the words exist and which was meant to constitute the entire third act, Aaron is a prisoner; the idea has won, but it was undoubtedly Aaron who sped it on its way. Now, that by his efforts the people have reached their safe destiny, he has become superfluous. Moses orders him to be set free, "and if he desires, he may live." But his function is lived out. He falls down dead; and Moses, sure in the success of the dogma, can conclude, "But even in the wasteland you shall be victorious and achieve the goal; unity with God."

It is natural that a musical work so dominated by a philosophical view

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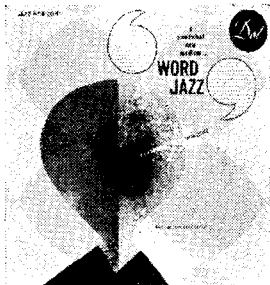
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does not have the mobility or dramatic stage power that we know from conventional opera. There are only three main roles; the people (chorus), Aaron (tenor), and Moses (in the main a speaking part). Their characters are predetermined and not subject to dramatic evolution. "Moses and Aaron" is thus in the tradition of the Baroque opera with set pieces reminiscent of the oratorio in the first act where the basic tenets of the conflict are stated. In the second act the action loosens up and a more operatic face is put upon the work.

THAT is not to say that the opera has no dramatic impact. On the contrary; the text is perhaps naive in its literary execution, but the problems are stated with power and clarity. However, it is the music which rather than underlining the text assumes a gigantic shape of its own and expresses in conjunction with the words but in its own right as well the dramatic situation. To this end Schoenberg employs a huge orchestra, seventeen woodwinds, eleven brasses, fourteen percussion instruments, piano, celeste, harp, two mandolins and the traditional contingent of strings. In addition there is an orchestra on stage consisting of at least twenty-five instruments, a large chorus and solo singers. Schoenberg makes use of all the possible coloristic effects of such a giant apparatus. Yet, the orchestration is transparent, at times even in the orbit of chamber music (often a concertante element, another baroque device, is introduced). The vocal lines are alternately sung and executed in "Sprechgesang" (declamatory speech at a given tonal pitch), a most effective means first introduced in "Pierrot Lunaire." Its application here is most ingenious since there are highly effective passages in which parts of the chorus sing while others, to a different text, declaim simultaneously, which not only heightens the dramatic tension but also makes for a far greater clarity of the individual vocal lines. In orchestral texture the work is most akin to Schoenberg's "Music zu einer Lichtspielszene," Op. 34, vocally it is occasionally reminiscent of Berg's "Wozzek," but essentially it is both novel and pure Schoenberg, charged with dramatic hypertension which only occasionally is relieved by lyric passages. In general, the music alternates between extended polyphonic lines and vehement clusters of purely harmonic thought. There is no doubt that "Moses and Aaron" is a most impressive work not only in Schoenbergian terms but as well in those of twentieth century musical creation.

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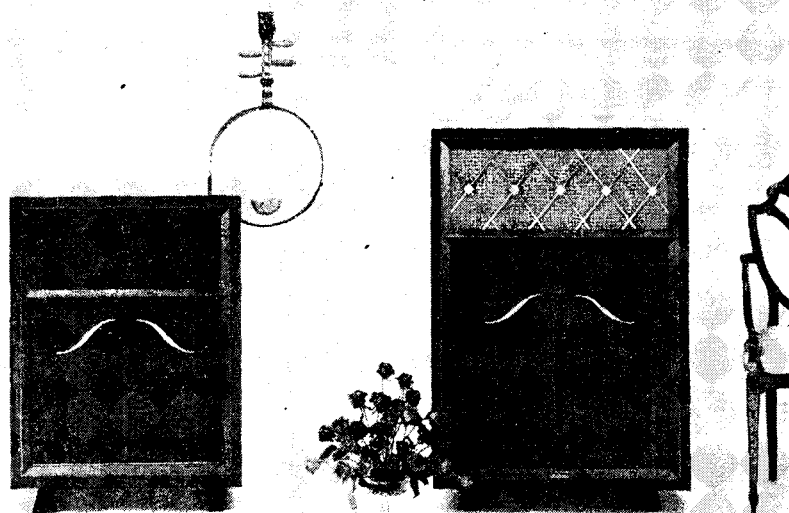
sents the first two acts but wisely omits the anticlimactic scene of the third, is the result of a broadcast by the Norddeutscher Rundfunk in 1954 with the best of several rehearsal takes and the final performance pieced together.

This in many ways proves unfortunate. Neither soloists nor chorus are as well rehearsed as one might wish (rumor has it that the first complete stage performance of the work this year in Zürich required 350 choral and thirty orchestral rehearsals, which apparently the broadcasting station was unable to grant). Consequently, the "Sprechgesang" is mostly incorrect in pitch, and the sung intervals of the soloists, most notably those of Helmut Krebs, an exceptionally fine singer with a splendid voice who portrays Aaron, are frequently quite off the mark. Rosbaud's direction is virile, concerned mainly with the large dramatic outbursts which he renders effectively, but not quite atmospheric enough, in the lyrical passages. The best parts are the purely orchestral interludes in which the conductor manages a transparency not easy to achieve with such a large apparatus.

IT IS rather a shame that the tremendous expenditures of energy which for all its faults must have gone into this performance could not have been recorded under recording studio conditions. The broadcast lacks balance. This leads to such incongruities as having the piccolos sounding by far fiercer than the rest of the gigantic orchestra and the entire chorus. In itself the chorus is unbalanced. There is a preponderance of sopranos which makes the altos almost inaudible and renders feeble the support of the tenors and basses. Even granted that the intricate vocal lines could probably never be heard with full clarity in a monaural recording under the best conditions—only stereophonic reproduction could do the trick—one cannot help feeling that the optimum has not been achieved.

Still, considering the tremendous expense and effort necessary for the presentation of such a work we are not likely to hear it in the near future in a concert or stage performance in the United States, and it is even more unlikely that another recording will be forthcoming. Thus one must be grateful to have at least this somewhat sketchy impression which will fall into better focus if listened to repeatedly, preferably with a vocal score, or, if this is not available, at least with the libretto which Columbia provides in both the German original and the English translation.

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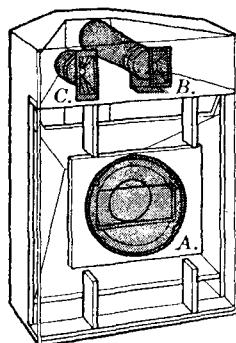


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"Adriana" and Tebaldi

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THE Lyric Opera of Chicago, in an enterprising mood or perhaps merely to gratify its prima donna, climaxed its annual fall season with a performance of Cilea's long-forgotten "Adriana Lecouvreur." Mounted for an American audience for the first

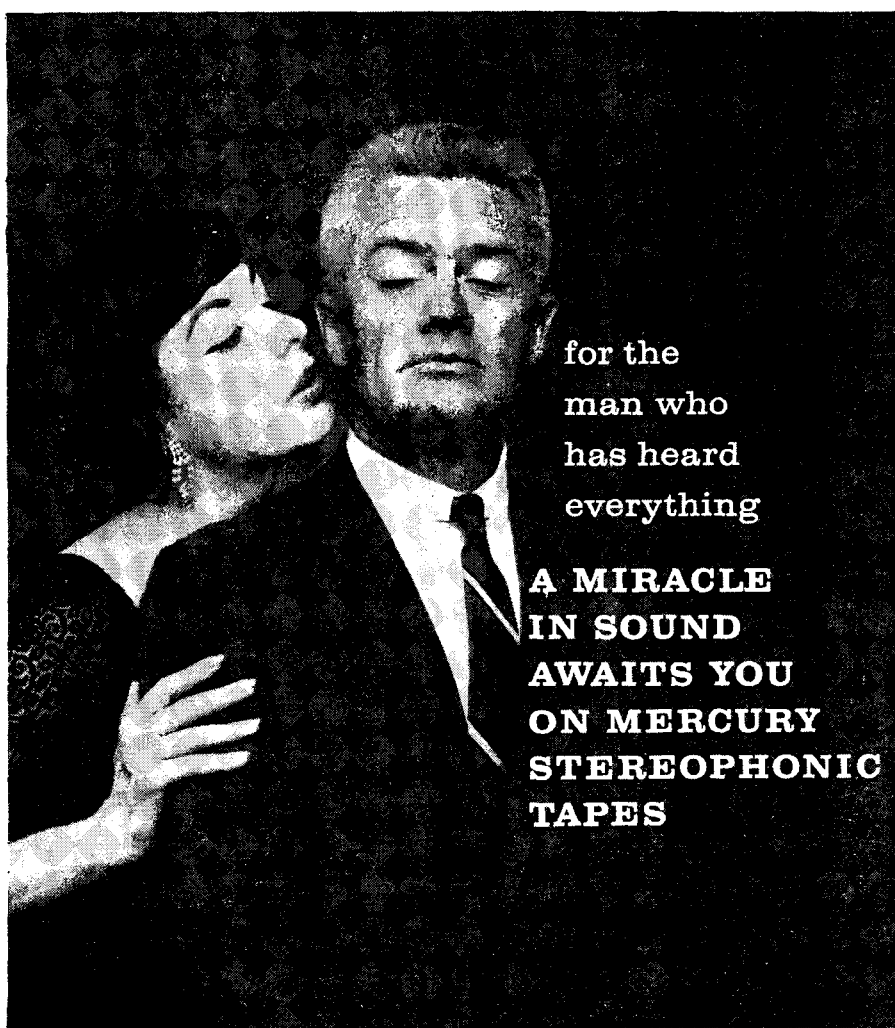
time in half a century (almost to the day), "Adriana Lecouvreur" turned out to be one of those genre pieces on which operatic divas and tenors as well as avid operatic audiences vent their enthusiasm with complete and joyful satisfaction to all concerned. To point up the opera's lack of originality,

the almost total absence of distinction or individuality, as critics do today (and did fifty years ago), would, however, be a fruitless quibble. For this opera, with little dramatic force, with a commonplace musical point of view, with facile rather than colorful writing, has yet enough ingratiating melody, skilful orchestration, appealing lyricism, theatrical interest, and above all musically supported emotional highpoints to set a sophisticated modern audience on fire.

Based on a Scribe play, the four acts of the opera are quite succinctly put together. Against a background of the Comedie Francaise in the 1730s, a tale of love, jealousy, intrigue, politics, poison, and death revolves around Adriana Lecouvreur, a favorite actress of the day. This is not the most improbable involvement in the operatic world, and only in the last act, in which a long-drawn-out death agony of the heroine threatens to achieve the opposite of its intended effect, is there a feeling of anti-climax, dramatically as well as musically.

Like the only two previous presentations of the work in this country (with Lina Cavalieri, Caruso, and Scotti at the Metropolitan Opera House, November 1907), the Chicago Opera's two performances boasted a group of protagonists hard, indeed virtually impossible to match today. Renata Tebaldi has an obvious affection and affinity for the title role. She lives it, and sings it in particularly glorious voice, giving the most trenchant and memorable portrayal of her American career (EDITOR'S NOTE: *Because of the unfortunate death of her mother, the last performance this season by Tebaldi in America*). Giulietta Simionato, the Princess de Bouillon, was the perfect mezzo-soprano foil. Giuseppe di Stefano sang ardently, with ringing top notes, as Adriana's lover, Maurizio, and Tito Gobbi gallantly stepped into the curiously lifeless part of the Stage Director of the Comedie Francaise. The sets, while avoiding the impression that they had survived the Metropolitan's original production, were not new, though they served their purpose innocuously. The veteran Tullio Serafin conducted the performances with authority.

In the same week the Lyric Opera revived its production of "Un Ballo in Maschera," a work also based on a Scribe play which, as a libretto, hardly compares favorably with the much maligned "Adriana" book. The Verdi of 1859 is of course a giant, almost fully mature musical personality, and when a bold spirit decides to restore the action of "Ballo" to its original Swedish locale from its present incredibly inept one of Boston, Massachusetts, the opera will have the



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