



Prokofiev on Tolstoy, Stravinsky on Gide

A TWO-AND-A-HALF-HOUR opera by the late Serge Prokofiev based on Tolstoy's "War and Peace" and never before seen in this country was the NBC-TV Opera Theatre's valuable service to the country on a recent Sunday afternoon. More than ordinary interest attached to the project, for it is now all of a dozen years since the Metropolitan (then under Edward Johnson) first announced its intention of producing the work when it should become available. Had the plans matured, it is evident from this televising, it would have been one of the important events of Johnson's later period.

Before turning to the work itself and the individuals involved, a blanket commendation is in order to Producer Samuel Chotzinoff and his able staff for putting together so presentable a version of a new work. When it is considered that even Metropolitan premièers have the advantage of a dress rehearsal before an audience, the effectiveness of this presentation, without even so meager a preliminary, was remarkable. It was a distance from perfection and some elements were inferior, but as a totality it withstood close scrutiny by answering the question: Just what kind of a score did Prokofiev derive from his background, his talent, and the massive subject with which he was concerned?

The answer, from this viewer and listener, would be a constantly absorbing exercise in atmospheres, backgrounds, and motives, decidedly episodic (in the manner of Russian chronicle plays), but still with a stronger line of essential story than many predecessor works in his country's literature. Perhaps because of the background against which it was written (the repulsion of the German invasion of the same "sacred homeland" where Napoleon was frustrated) there is a good deal of glorification of "Mother Russia," but Prokofiev commanded the musical fervor to make his patriotic impulse ring sincere.

He also mustered enough melodic power and vitality of emotion to make the long-drawn romance of Andrey and Natasha of operatic impact, if rather small beside the scale on which it is drawn by Tolstoy. And, in tribute to the libretto derived by the composer and Mira Mendelssohn (his wife) from the huge novel (and rendered into appropriate English by Joseph Machlis), the balls and par-

ties, scenes and backgrounds make up an atmosphere which could be sensed and appreciated.

As resolved by Prokofiev's final revision (after discarding an earlier version that would have occupied two separate nights in the theatre) the work divides into two equal portions. From the meeting of Andrey to the abortive suicide attempt of Natasha after her unhappy affair with Kuragin, Part One is devoted to the 1810-1811 period of "peace." Part Two, beginning with the siege and battle of Borodino in August 1812, is "war": with Natasha and Andrey reunited, and Kutuzov proclaimed savior as the French retreat through the bitter winter.

PART ONE, by its social nature, is more varied and musically showy than Part Two, which devotes an hour and a quarter to the battlefield atmosphere. Its climax comes in a powerfully written scene for Kutuzov and his generals in which they discuss a plan of action. It is finally his decision to make; and Prokofiev has added nobly to the operatic literature for baritone in the dramatic aria in which Kutuzov chooses to abandon Moscow and fight another day—while outside his soldiers cheer him as the man who will "lead them to victory." Kenneth Smith, who recently did an excellent performance in Orff's "Triumph of Aphrodite," made a visually striking and musically eloquent Kutuzov.

With the single exception of Helena Scott's Natasha—her voice was persistently brittle-sounding to my ear, and she didn't provide the physical illusion of "youth and radiant beauty" described in the text—the principal parts were well cast for vocal sound and suitable appearance. Morley Meredith was a successful Andrey, David Lloyd an excellent Pierre Bezukhov, and Davis Cunningham appropriately dissolute as the "rotter" Anatol. Even Napoleon was made credible by Leon Lishner's good make-up and vocal coloration. (He will be remembered for his excellent Priest in "The Saint of Bleeker Street.") The female parts, aside from Natasha's, are relatively brief, but Beatrice Krebs lent dramatic weight to her scenes as Akhrosimova, Linda McNaughton was a good foil to Miss Scott at Sonia, and Gloria Lane gave a relevant accent to the frivolous Helene.

So far as Peter Herman Adler's

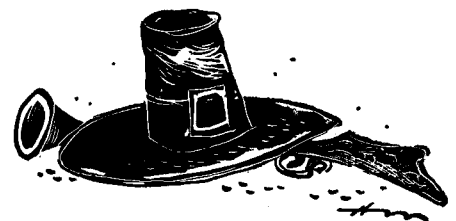
musical direction is concerned, an essential tribute is implied in the serious discussion possible of the work's merits. There was, in Part One especially, a sense of discontinuity from time to time as though no strong leadership was being provided (something inherent in the way operatic TV functions and emphasized in the circumstances of an elaborate new undertaking). The orchestra did not produce the quantity of sound one suspects there is in Prokofiev's scoring, and the balance was occasionally faulty. In Part Two, which is more concentrated, largely concerned with male voices in compact groups, the aural balance and integration were better. Considering what Chotzinoff, his associate Charles Polacheck, and the resourceful Kirk Browning regarded as acceptable opera on TV five years ago, this "War and Peace" was akin to putting "The Miracle" on off-Broadway.

The audibility of the English text varied from scene to scene, from one individual to another, according to the skills of the people involved and the advantage or disadvantage of the musical situation. I was, fortunately, possessed of a typescript of the libretto, so I was aware of what the performers were trying to say, even when I wasn't sure that they were. Others, less favored, could have had a hard time following what was being sung. In this circumstance, Gian-Carlo Menotti's intermission "plug" on behalf of the NBC-TV Opera venture had a slightly hollow ring. The mere fact that something is being performed in English does not, automatically, make it understandable.

Any reasonable conclusion would have to be that this derivation from "War and Peace" provoked some strongly Prokofievian music from its gifted creator, that it was done with understanding and artistic conscience, and that its presentation notched a new mark of accomplishment for operatic TV in this country.

THERE is something irresistibly appealing about the spectacle of Igor Stravinsky conducting a performance of a suite from "Petroushka" and reading the music from a score, as he did during his recent week of guest conducting with the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall. It tends to put in perspective cer-

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Books for Young People



CHILDREN'S reading continues to be a topic of consuming concern to parents and teachers alike, leading to the proposal of many kinds of devices intended to improve and encourage it. One such device, and a good one, is a program in family reading conducted by a large industrial concern (*Harper's*, December 1956). Here books were made available to employees with an invitation to take them home and read them with their children. The only inducement that boys and girls need to read widely for pleasure and

for learning is a large, carefully selected collection of books easily accessible, with someone who knows books and children at hand for guidance. If the school library, the public library children's room, the bookmobile, and the home have enough good books, the children will read.

Reviewers for this issue: Della McGregor, Chief, Youth Services, St. Paul, Minn., Public Library; Alice Brooks McGuire, Librarian, Casis Elementary School, Austin, Texas; Lucile W. Raley, Consultant in Library Service, Waco, Texas, Independent Schools; Elizabeth Williams, Supervisor, Library and Textbook Section, Los Angeles, Calif., Board of Education.

—FRANCES LANDER SPAIN, Coordinator,

Children's Services, The New York Public Library.

WHISTLE FOR THE TRAIN. By Golden MacDonald. Illustrated by Leonard Weisgard. Doubleday. \$2.50. All trains have a fascination for the three-to-five-year-old, and this one is especially intriguing from the first picture of the long curving track disappearing into the hills to the last tunnel with the train barely visible in the distance. There is suspense as the drawbridge rises, and there is a lesson in safety too, as the busy little train blows its whistle, warning cats and rabbits, cows as well as children to stand back as it goes "clickity, clack down the track."

—ELIZABETH WILLIAMS.

THE BLUE MOUNTAIN. By Beth Lewis. Illustrated by Adrienne Adams. Knopf. \$2.25. Excitement abounds from beginning to end in this warm, appealing Irish fairy tale. The search for Prince Desmond's wife by his father, the good king, and his counselors is positively frightening. For, you see, the young prince loves a gentle princess of his own choosing. But, never you fear. To his rescue come the "wee folk" on Blue Mountain. They help solve the dilemma and bring about a happy ending.

Numerous detailed, fragile, fairy-like illustrations placed at strategic points make this fairy tale all the more intriguing.

—LUCILE W. RALEY.

THE PINK HAT. By Velma Ilsley. Lippincott. \$2. The underlying theme of this charming little book is, "Pride goeth before a fall," but the more obvious precept is the oft-heard admonish-

ment, "Pick up your things!" Penelope, following her customary practice, left her lovely pink hat on the floor and went out to play.

What happened while she was away

Was very clear to Penelope.
The hat was gone! A B C
(rabbits)

Beside the satin ribbon slept.
Penelope wept!

And of course becomes a wiser (but not sadder) child. Velma Ilsley's first book, with its whimsical childlike illustrations and gay little verses, gives promise of more good things to come.

—ALICE BROOKS MCGUIRE.

THE LOST POND. By Marguerite Fellows Melcher. Frontispiece by Paul Lantz. Viking. \$2.50. This is a nostalgic story of leisurely summer vacations spent by the author on her grandfather's farm in the New Hampshire mountains. The activities best remembered revolve about Pauline, who has just turned fifteen. While timidly probing

and testing her desire for personal independence and acceptance as an individual in the family circle, she discovers that greater freedom of action also brings with it greater personal responsibility. This story of the gradual flowering of a young girl at the turn of the century is told with fine integrity, grace, and charm.

Since fifteen-year-old girls of today no longer lead the sheltered lives they once did, Pauline's story, and the inclusion of a mystery surrounding Lost Pond, will probably find a wider circle of readers in the twelve-to-thirteen age bracket.

—DELLA MCGREGOR.

SECRET FRIEND. By Neta Lohnes Frazier. Illustrated by Henrietta Jones Moon. Longmans, Green. \$2.75. Girls under twelve will enjoy this new story about Rhoda Sperry, her family, and her friends. Rhoda's need for a close friend with whom to share secrets and daily experiences is one common to many girls at this age. The story is told with sympathetic understanding and practical realism. Rhoda puts aside giggling older sisters, self-sufficient brothers, and designing classmates when Miss Purvis, an understanding teacher, and Danny, a newly acquired boy friend, convince her of her own talents. Then she finds within herself contentment and happiness.

Black-and-white illustrations are adapted to the text. —L. W. R.

THE HOUSE OF SIXTY FATHERS. By Meindert DeJong. Pictures by Maurice Sendak. Harper. \$2.50. From an experience Mr. DeJong had while serving with Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force of World War II fame, he has made a stark and moving story of a little Chinese boy, separated from his family, and his incredible escape from Japanese-held territory. This harrowing tale, compounded of Tien Pao's terror and courage, despair and endurance, of Chinese guerrillas and their resourcefulness, of air battles high over the mountains, and of the little pig Glory-of-the-Republic, all end happily. The little boy was adopted by an American bomber unit and



"... a wiser (but not sadder) child."

—From "The Pink Hat."