



"Wozzeck" at the Met—"Maria Golovin" on TV

IT HAS been years since the fall of a final curtain on a work new to the Metropolitan Opera's repertory was greeted with the spontaneous bravos and applause that acclaimed the conclusion of the latest one. What it plainly said was, "Welcome 'Wozzeck,'" which was only its due, of course, for the impression it made between "Aida" one night and "Bohème" another merely attested the incontestable—no comparable work for the musical theatre has been written since it was new in the 1920s.

In putting all its resources at the disposal of Alban Berg's masterpiece, Rudolf Bing has discharged a debt, closed a file of unfinished Metropolitan business and, perhaps, opened a vista of operatic things to come. Whether he has, in the process, incurred some debts of a strictly monetary sort will be known better after the scheduled repetitions (the \$25 top for the benefit premiere left half the orchestra unsold, and a hurried call for "volunteers" to fill the empty seats). But there are times when even a business-minded opera management must be content to take the credit and let the cash go.

Taking one thing with another, Karl Böhm's superbly cohesive direction is giving New York the best totality of the score it has yet heard. The previous efforts of Rosenstock at the City Center and Mitropolous with the Philharmonic had distinctions relative to their surroundings, but Böhm's marksmanship clearly exceeded that generally credited to Leopold Stokowski, when he directed his Philadelphia-based production in the Metropolitan in 1931. Considering that it has been woven into the texture of a repertory season, it attested to all-out coöperation on all levels from stage hands to stage director. The results were equally triumphant for stage director Herbert Graf and conductor Böhm.

"Wozzeck," of course, differs from virtually any prior creation for the musical theatre in being devoid of most elements considered "entertaining": no arias, ballet, comic "relief," etc. It has some moments of grim humor among the prevailing heartache, but it is, essentially, a relentless playing out of marked cards held in the hands of Destiny. It is hard and unyielding, tawdry and even bestial; but, even as Marie turns to the Bible for a prefiguring of her sensualism,

and Wozzeck cries out to his Maker for pity, so we must consider that even its lowliest creatures are human flesh, and the blood that is spilled in vengeance has been mingled in the eternal mystery that produced a child, the helpless victim of it all.

If Berg had responded to this challenge in terms of the erotic (of which there is virtually nothing), or of the psychotic (of which there is somewhat more) the results would have long since dwindled in interest, ceased to be the spectre haunting the Metropolitan that it has been for all this time. But every new hearing affirms in greater detail the totality of sorrowing and exaltation, which has been in it from the start. There comes a moment in Act II (the orchestral interlude after Wozzeck realizes he is a man betrayed) in which Berg's somewhat cautious and constrained use of his idiom dissolves under the surge of emotion, and he begins to move his tonal resources with a freedom and ease that results in nothing more nor less than poignant, purposeful music. The following scenes are mostly shorter, the momentum cumulative. With or without the increasingly clear suggestions of tonality, as in the famous crescendo on the unison C we are in the grip of an experience that may never attain "popularity," but challenges anyone to hear it out without taking it in.

OF TOP quality in this cast was something a believable "Wozzeck" cannot do without—a powerfully sung, vividly acted Wozzeck by Hermann Uhde. He has excellent stature for the role, a stiffly military bearing that crumbles affectingly at the appropriate time, plus the vocal sonority to make his characterization complete. He has, also (for a man born in Bremen) a surprisingly adept command of the English text—the standard one of Eric Blackall and Vida Harford, somewhat amended—reflecting his foresight in being born of an American mother and a German father.

Were everybody else of this quality, the Metropolitan's "Wozzeck" cast could be considered a string of well-matched jewels; but none, at least, were paste. Eleanor Steber's Marie is, for a singer of her background, not bad; but for Berg, it is not very good. Her puffy, well-fleshed outlines scarcely suggested deprivation and

poverty, her vocalism, perversely, better than it need be. Clearly, her vocal manners are so ingrained that an unvocalized sound is resisted, even when it is the essence of what Berg called "bel parlare" rather than the time-honored "bel canto." She made a searing effect in certain passages, especially in the high-lying C-B at the climax of her Bible-reading scene in Act III, and puts in us her debt for an all-out effort. But for Marie, such a person as Ljuba Welitsch would be both crude and elemental, whereas Steber is rather a crude suggestion of the elemental.

The others in the mainly male cast range from the picturesque, if Peter Piperish, doctor of Karl Doench, to the spirited, but thick-voiced captain of Paul Franke, and the muscular, guttural sounding Drum Major of Kurt Baum. Smaller roles were capably performed by Ezio Flagello (an Apprentice), Charles Anthony (Andreas), and Alice Plotkin as the mute offspring of Marie and Wozzeck. There was admirable precision in the orchestral playing, and enormous spirit, though Böhm's inclination to a heavy brass sound created a curtain of sonority between the stage and the auditorium that had more to do with quality than quantity. But this is a conductor with a sure comprehension of the part that detail and nuance plays in a proper realization of Berg's closely written score.

Whether the whole gained from the English text is at least debatable; by Act III it didn't really matter what language was being sung, so long as "blut" was "blood" and "hopp-hopp" was "hopp-hopp." But no one without a sense of total direction could have made much of the narrative, word by word, and the English text was best when it came closest to the German original. As a final detail, Caspar Neher's scenery qualified as workable on the practically machineless stage, and was mobile within the split-timing decreed by the orchestral interludes. But it added little, in atmosphere or mood. Unlike Robert Edmond Jones's stylized "expressionism" of the old Philadelphia venture, this was blandly representational, and stylistically non-descript.

Hearing "Wozzeck" with so much high-pressured effort expended upon it, with a complement of highly talented if not wholly suitable people laboring on its behalf, stimulates a curiosity for much more knowledge about it than we currently possess. It is evident that many musical phrases and thematic elements are passed back and forth as the work progresses, and the interludes assume increasingly more importance. The last

interlude, a dirge for the collapsed world of Wozzeck and Marie, is tensely, proudly beautiful and expressive, giving rise to a curiosity as to how it is really put together. If the present production stimulates more questions of the sort—and, perhaps, a few answers—it will have given cause to thank Rudolf Bing far beyond another new Puccini production or even “Cav” and “Pag.”

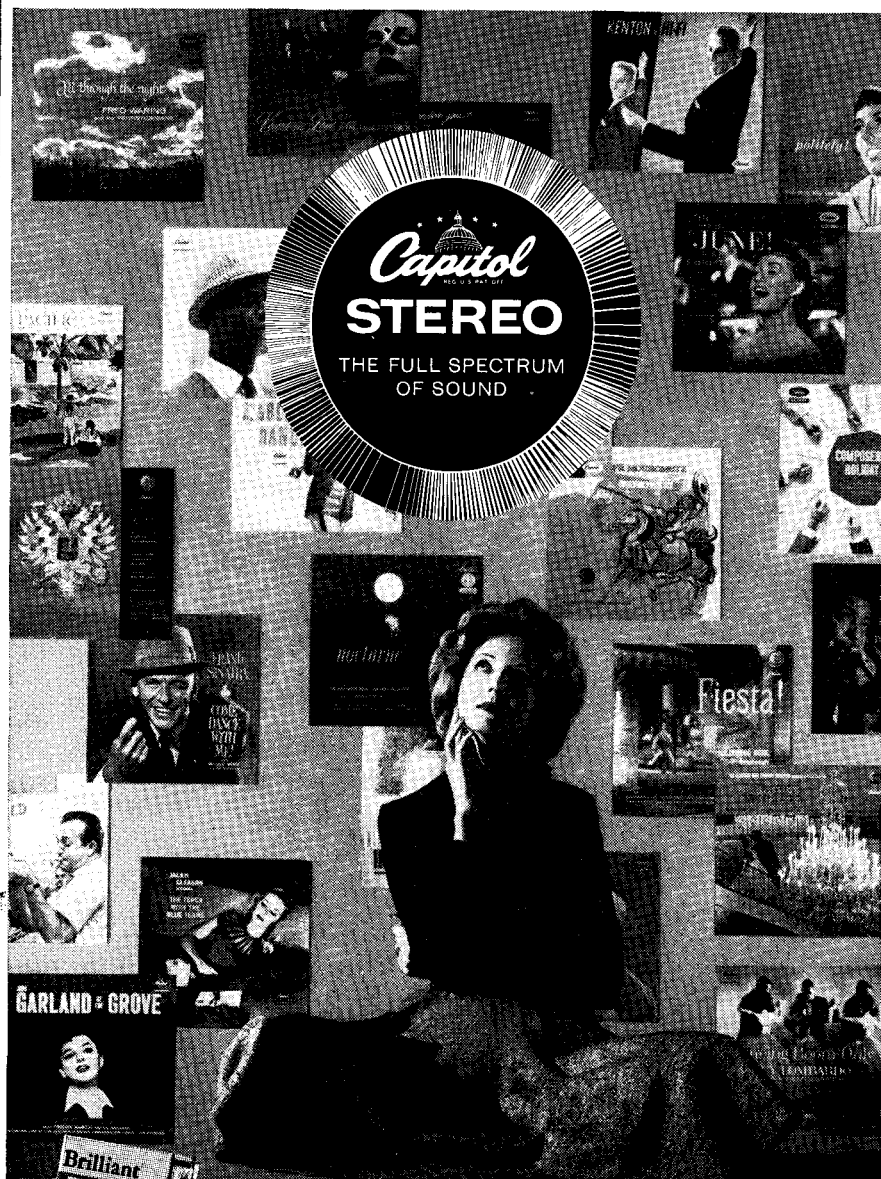
In the operatic day-to-day, the same week produced another “Meistersinger” in which the Böhm-conducted cast included Aase Nordmo-Løvberg for the first time as Eva. Her good looks and promising sound in Act I induced some lively hopes for the ensuing episodes, but it soon became clear that this is a singer hampered by an inadequate technique for a theatre of the Metropolitan's size. When she could marshal her resources for a medium-voiced effort, as in “Geliebter, spare den Zorn” (midway in Act II), the sound had a clinging roundness to suit her physical appearance, but the workshop scene was woody and unreliable, the quintet without consistent focus. The only real “Mastersinger” in this cast was Karl Doench, as Beckmesser, the others being hard-pressed to make vocal ends meet.

THE telecast on NBC-TV of Menotti's “Maria Golovin” confirmed some impressions of strengths and weaknesses observed when the work was presented in its brief Broadway “run” (five performances) at the Martin Beck last winter. When he is concerned with the obsessive love affair of the blind Donato and the somewhat shallow Maria, Menotti works with an assurance and technical skill that notch his personal standard a little higher than ever before. But almost everything else is inferior in quality and interest. The best portions were admirably performed under the direction of Peter Herman Adler by much the same cast as before.

A final novelty of the week was Andre Jolivet's “Symphonie de Danses,” performed by the Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of George Szell in its final visit of the year to Carnegie Hall. Assuming that one was unfamiliar with Dukas's “La Peri” or Stravinsky's “L'Oiseau de Feu” or Ravel's “La Valse” it could be described as colorful and no more than moderately time-consuming. If one had heard at least one of the foregoing, it could better be termed a pot-“Peri” of the dance pieces French composers have been writing since Berlioz's “Un Ball” in the “Fantastique.” It was brilliantly performed.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

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The Other Bergman

ALTHOUGH "Smiles of a Summer Night," and "The Seventh Seal" have attracted a certain amount of attention from those who regularly patronize their local art cinemas, the name of Ingmar Bergman is not so well known as it ought to be, and probably will be. Bergman is a forty-year-old Swedish director who has written most of the twenty movies he has made—a peculiarly fortunate combination of abilities that allows his films to express exactly what almost all other movies, with their multiplicity of craftsmen and egos, lack—a sense of personal vision. In Paris and other European centers, Bergman has already been taken up as an important cultural and artistic phenomenon (five of his films recently played simultaneously in Paris), and the film festivals at Cannes, Berlin and Venice have duly recognized his worth with plaques and statuettes of varying inscriptions and metals. "Wild Strawberries," the most recent of his movies to be seen here, will help focus more attention on Bergman in this country, although judging by the reception of the other films of his in American release, is not likely to be popular, nor to attain very wide distribution.

I hesitate to say that Bergman's films are for the connoisseur, for that implies that their appeal is snobbish and even esoteric. It's already possible to determine whether someone is middlebrow or upperbrow, depending on whether the word Bergman suggests Ingmar or Ingrid. There is no real reason why reasonably large audiences shouldn't find his movies stimulating. They have enormous visual appeal, are excellently acted, and his themes are universal rather than national or regional. They often do have the dark, gloomy preoccupations that Swedish films, not to mention Strindberg's plays, have exhibited in the past, but the modern movie can probably use a good dose of gloom about man's spiritual condition. Yet, even the delightful, wickedly erotic "Smiles of a Summer Night" crept in and out of art houses without causing much fanfare, except among an appreciative few. The heavier, allegorical "The Seventh Seal" was more difficult, and I suppose required more from audiences in the way of intellectual response. Nevertheless, the small company that arranges for the American distribution of Bergman's films is singularly hesitant about pub-

licizing him. He is not nearly so well known, or often heard of, as Fellini, the only other film-maker in the world today who approaches Bergman in stature, if not productivity.

"Smiles of a Summer Night" (shown here last year) was reminiscent of a Rene Clair grown more introspective and ironic. Its marital infidelities and amorous intrigues in a turn of the century Swedish setting were beautifully and deftly acted, although a contretemps occurred in the American showing. During a passage in the film when a young wife and her maid are discussing indecorous matters the sound track continues in Swedish, while the subtitles disappear. The Swedish-speaking members of the audience (very few, naturally) laughed at the dialogue; the rest of the audience laughed at the censors. "The Seventh Seal" was opened here with such secrecy—one might have thought, for instance, that the Paris Theatre in New York was showing contraband goods—that it took word-of-mouth and Bosley Crowther's appreciative review to get it any audience at all. A member of the releasing organization explained that it was the policy of Bergman to avoid publicity, to let him "catch on" slowly. *How*, one might ask, if no one hears about him?

THE rather uncapitalized Swedish film industry, of course, hardly has the resources for widespread publicity efforts in behalf of its films abroad. Bergman himself has resisted coming here, and even more wisely has resisted Hollywood's offers. The average Swedish movie costs about \$100,000 less than the price of a cheap American monster movie, and about one-third of the sum Ingrid Bergman gets for one screen appearance. This irony aside, the other Bergman has shown that he isn't the least hampered by a need for rigid economy. He tends to use the same group of actors for most of his films; an actor who takes a large role in one may be given a small role in the next. In "Wild Strawberries" the photography is not only impeccably professional, it is exquisite, worth seeing even if the story failed to interest—something hard to imagine. The most precious commodity in the movie is what Bergman brings; there's no way of pricing it.

The framework for "Wild Strawberries" is deceptively simple: it is a tale of one day in the life of an elder-

ly professor of medicine, who is being honored for fifty years of service. But within the frame are fascinating complexities, minglings of dream and reality, of past and present. The time shifts and backflashes, although on occasion cumbersome, are achieved with lucidity. The professor is played by Victor Sjöström, once a famed director of silent films who returned to acting after a frustrating Hollywood career and who is now Sweden's most eminent actor. His performance is remarkably subtle and sensitive, as he lives through a dream-like day and a past that is nostalgic and painful.

Even more painful are the nightmares he must endure throughout the day. The first takes place just before he awakes. The dream is of his own funeral, and before the day has ended the starkly visual symbols of the dream recur in distorted form, as though the events of the day were foreshadowed. In other dreams and reveries he is led back to his past life (particularly to that turn of the century period on which Bergman evidently likes to dwell in his own imagination). The vignettes and cameos recall a lost love, an unfaithful wife, an idyllic glimpse of his parents. The old man, we discover, has been living in a shell of isolation, avoiding intimate human contact because it might result in pain. Here we encounter another prevalent Bergman theme. The ending he has chosen for the old man's day is a relatively peaceful one, but not before he puts him through the worst nightmare of all, one in which his medical qualifications are seemingly reviewed. It turns out, however, to be an examination of another kind.

In this same hallucination the professor catches his palm on a nail, and as he holds up his hand we see for a moment a wound resembling a stigmata, meaning perhaps, that his day is a kind of Passion for him. Bergman's father was a preacher, and because Bergman's work includes the personal element these religious symbols tend to recur in his stories, sometimes adding to their obscurity. His preoccupation with the symbolic detail makes all that he does interesting, even haunting, but probably detracts from the popular appeal of his movies. Nevertheless, he is not so obsessed with his personal message that he fails to communicate, even to entertain. There isn't much doubt that Bergman has, almost single-handed, brought back the Swedish film to its once high eminence. As more of his pictures are shown here, evaluations of his meanings and importance will grow more precise. Meanwhile it is time to know him. "Wild Strawberries" makes a fine acquaintance.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.