

# Musical Theatre on the Round

**I**N A season which has, to date, included musical works of one sort or another by such valued hands as Richard Adler, Noel Coward, Frank Loesser, and Arthur Schwartz—to give them their alphabetical due—there is little doubt that the most attention has been attracted by the talents of young, little-known Jerry Herman. Doubtless the former are penalized for having long since reached standards well above the average of the young and little-known, but that should not deny the score of “Milk and Honey” (RCA Victor LOC/LSO 1065, \$4.98/5.98) the honors to which Herman is honestly entitled.

For purposes of home listeners, it gains immeasurably from having Robert Weede and Mimi Benzell to sing “Shalom” and Molly Picon to perform “Chin Up, Ladies.” That is to say, they have the kind of vocal talents that might reasonably have been expected to be heard on records before the day of Paul Lukas, Rex Harrison, and Rosalind Rus-

sell in “musicals.” Aside from the insistence of the first phrase and a half of “Milk and Honey” on sounding like “Only Bravest Hearts” from Gounod’s “Faust,” Herman’s music has a jolly kind of jauntiness that is welcome to hear. Also, in the lyrics (by himself) for “Shalom” and “Milk and Honey,” as in the music for these and “Independence Hora,” Herman has contrived to infuse some sense of the locale (Israel) in his product. Now and then, Herman tends to follow rather closely in the footsteps of some illustrious predecessors, but he demonstrates, prevailingly, a stride of his own that could take him far.

**A**MONG those predecessors, one of the most illustrious who is himself in full stride this season is Frank Loesser, whose score for “How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying” (RCA Victor LOC 1066, \$4.98) strikes me as his happiest effort since “Guys and Dolls.” This nominates it as superior not only to the short-lived “Greenwillow” but also to the long-running “Most Happy Fella.” Whereas, in the last of these, Loesser seemed to me to be striving for a scale of writing not quite comfortable for him, in “How to Succeed” he is clearly working in the genre manner he knows so well, making of such a semicomical conceit as “Happy to Keep His Dinner Warm” something melodically delightful as well as lyrically entertaining. Likewise, “Coffee Break,” “A Secretary Is Not a Toy,” and “The Company Way,” rather than being elements of a score in which the music is secondary to the action—as I have seen it described—have a perfectly functional part in the wholeness of “How to Succeed.”

Oddly enough, while working with singers lacking the vocal range of Weede, Jo Sullivan, and Art Lund in “Most Happy Fella,” Loesser has produced more ingenious lyric lines and rhythmic patterns for the limited voices at his command. Probably the intent here was to provide maximum audibility for the words, but, since he does both, Loesser seems to have served himself even better than he planned. As for “Been a Long Day,” Loesser has performed a variation on “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” (duo into trio), all the more appealing since the basic idea was his own (1948).

As the foregoing (plus the parodis-

tic “Grand Old Ivy,” which may serve Rudy Vallee as another “Maine Stein Song”) are all on Side 1 of the “original cast” album, the total of quality it contains should be evident. Probably for reasons inherent in the “drama,” “Paris Original,” “Rosemary,” “Cinderella, Darling,” “Love from a Heart of Gold,” and “Brotherhood of Man” (a kind of secular “When the Saints Go Marching In”) are not as aurally suave, but each has lyrico-theatre plot values that are doubtless self-justifying in the theatre. Freshness returns just in time for a melodic uplift before curtain time in “I Believe in You,” perfectly delivered by Robert Morse. Not to be forgotten, either, are the aptest kind of vocal style for what they do from Claudette Sutherland, Bonnie Scott, and Virginia Martin. As for the clever orchestrations of Robert Ginzler, they are often as clever in their vocalizations for performers who really can’t sing. You’d hardly know it, however, from the way in which they are supported, carried and, when need be, discreetly drowned out.

What we have, in most of the other current instances, are less performances of scores than a notable song or two surrounded at “album length” by what the audiences have to sit through to hear them. In the case of “Sail Away” it is, of course, Elaine Stritch making the most of the opportunities of “Why Do the Wrong People Travel” (Capitol SWAO 1643, \$6.98). In other, less “sophisticated” times, this would have been one side of a “single” with the entertaining spoof of the Rodgers-Hammerstein “Alphabet Song” (in “The Sound of Music”) called “The Little One’s ABC” on the other. However, this would doubtless have been close to the two-dollar category, and for relatively little more, the LP of “Sail Away” offers nearly a dozen others.

**I**N “Kean” (Columbia KOL 5720, \$5.98), the single “theme” is the rather lengthier one of Alfred Drake’s polished performance in the part of the nineteenth-century English actor. As Edmund Kean was, among other things, an eminent Shakespearian, this romance tends to invite a style of performance and an arrangement of emphasis that arouse recollections of Drake’s performance in “Kiss Me Kate.” So far all is well, for Drake has sustained his capacity to be compelling longer than any musical comedy baritone has a right to, thanks to his sound vocal manners and his excellent enunciation. The sticky point is that, unlike the case with Drake’s “Kismet,” in which they had a bank of fine ideas by Alexander Borodin on which to draw, Robert Wright and George Forrest are here drawing on their own. (Honesty is not always the best musical policy.) —I.K.

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# Mravinsky's Tchaikovsky

IT IS easy to find flaws in practically any performance, but when one is faced with such satisfying interpretations as those by Eugene Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic of the last three Tchaikovsky symphonies (Deutsche Grammophon LPM 18657-8-9, \$5.98 each) the task is more difficult than usual. It is hard to answer the question, "What is so particularly remarkable since they have been superbly conducted already by many great conductors?" To anyone who wants a specific answer to this, I would suggest listening to Wilhelm Mengelberg's two records of Tchaikovsky's Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, recently reissued (Telefunken Collectors Series TH 97001 and 97002). There is no doubt that Mengelberg with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra plays them as well as one would expect, and yet the Leningrad Orchestra's rendition is definitely superior. Perhaps it is because the Russians seem to believe in every note of the score and apparently are not a bit hamstrung by the decades-old criticism of Tchaikovsky's music as being oversentimental, banal, and even "*pompeux*," a word the French like to dismiss it with. Or should I say that this rendition is so authentic, so true, because it has no foreign accent? To quote Pushkin in his Prologue to "Russlan and Ludmilla," "There reigns the Russian spirit, there it smells of Russia."

Listening to this orchestra, one is particularly impressed by their "ensemble playing," due, of course, to an extraordinary discipline—a discipline one often finds in Western orchestras, but somehow does not expect from the Russians, and for good reason. In the history of Russian music Russian orchestras have never been known to be exceptionally good, since for such a large and musical country Russia produced rather a small number of outstanding conductors—by comparison with Germany, for example. After mentioning Balakirev, Safonov, Napravnik, Blumenfeld, Rachmaninoff, and Koussevitzky, there is not much left to add to this list. But now the old generation, and this includes also a number of merely *tüchtige* conductors who did their work at the Maryinsky Theatre, Bolshoi, and the opera houses in Kiev, Odessa, and Tiflis, are no longer alive. And the list of conductors "since the Revolution" is even smaller. Two of them, Kondrashin and Ivanov, have played for our audiences without leav-

ing much of an impression. There are still a few conductors with whom we are acquainted through their recordings—Samosud, Nebolsin, and Rachlin—but none of them is considered in Russia as good as Eugene Mravinsky.

I am inclined to agree with this opinion, although I still would not place Mravinsky on the same level with the first-rate conductors in Europe or in this country. If I had not met him some fifteen years ago at the First International Festival in Prague, if I had not seen him at work at rehearsals and had not gained through personal contact some knowledge of his personality, I would not have been surprised by his achievement with his orchestra. Then forty-four years old, tall and lean, he was as dogmatic with the men in the orchestra as he was in social intercourse, and showed so little warmth that one would hardly believe that he was a musician.

He was born in Leningrad, where he made his studies and his career, and he is very chauvinistic about that city. I remember well how he did not want me to forget the difference between Leningrad and Moscow—the former always carrying on the tradition of "The Mighty Five."

AT THE time of our meeting Mravinsky was just beginning to "create" this orchestra and he was eager to hear great conductors in live performances, for he knew them only from those recordings that reached Russia. Then he was a great admirer of Toscanini only, and I gained an impression that his admiration was caused especially by the orchestral discipline of the late Maestro. Mravinsky must have set this as an example for his own orchestra.

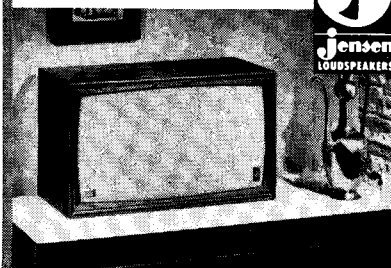
However, the Moscovites (speaking privately) thought that Mravinsky drilled his musicians in a military fashion worthy of Czar Paul I, who after watching a parade is said to have remarked: "It's too bad you still can see them breathe." And the Moscovites (again speaking privately) regretted that Mravinsky had no opportunity to go to Europe before 1956.

Nevertheless, the discipline seems to have done the orchestra no harm, and if now Mravinsky plays everything else as well as these Tchaikovsky symphonies, I venture to predict that the Leningrad Philharmonic's forthcoming visit to this country next fall will create a sensation.

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