

Italy by Ear

By IRVING KOLODIN

EVERYBODY knows that Italy is shaped like a boot—everybody, that is, save the musicians whose talents, or genius, as the case may be, have made Italy and music synonymous for centuries. To them the physical outline has subtly merged with the metaphysical to produce a shape much more like a lyre. The strings would be gathered at a narrow nape at Sicily, spreading out to a taut block of tuning pins anchored on the Alps.

The allegorical soul of Russia, with its fantasies and folklore, has been likened to a marvelous cat with a lair deep in the forest. When it moved to the right, it told a story; when it moved to the left, it sang a song. Thus, the essence of Russian folk art. One might say of Italy that when the wind blew from the west, the lyre responded one way, when it came from the east it spoke differently; and, of course, when it was lapped by Libian air (or airs) from the south, it vibrated in a tonality all its own.

The remarkable thing about Italy, by comparison with other lands, is how little of its characteristic product is what is commonly called "folk music." That is not to say that it is lacking in regional products from Sicily and Naples on the south to the provinces of the north. But in almost every instance they bear the name of identifiable composers. Richard Strauss discovered this paradox when he wrote his early symphony "Aus Italien" after a visit to the peninsula. He stumbled on a lively little tune and wove it into his finale, in the calm assumption it was a folk melody. In Germany, certainly, its creator would most probably have been the celebrated, prolific Anon. But in Italy it was a product of Luigi Denza, who wrote over 500 songs including the one called "Funiculi-Funicula" which appealed to Strauss. Denza was a graduate of the Naples Conservatory with the skill to write an opera produced in his native city. Learning, however, did not stifle the impulse to write such a rollicking tune when he felt the urge.

The sum of it is that Italy has been producing musicians for so many generations in so many categories of expression that there could hardly be that basic entity in typical folk music—the

"unknown composer." An Italian who had a musical idea could, most probably, also write it down, and perhaps even get it published. Who, for example, would know which is a composed tune, "O Sole mio" or "Santa Lucia"? As it happens, Eduardo di Capua (who also wrote "Maria Mari") composed "O Sole mio," while some forgotten, parallel Neapolitan wrote "Santa Lucia."

THE art of Vivaldi was highly developed when the young J. S. Bach was seeking guidance along the paths of instrumental music, and eagerly absorbed the works of the Venetian master as a road map to its topography. Handel journeyed to Italy as a matter of course to absorb postgraduate skills not available to him in the north of Germany; and Mozart's youthful exposure to the operatic influences of Milan in his sub-teens did more, probably, to affect his mode of expression than anything save being born the son of Leopold Mozart.

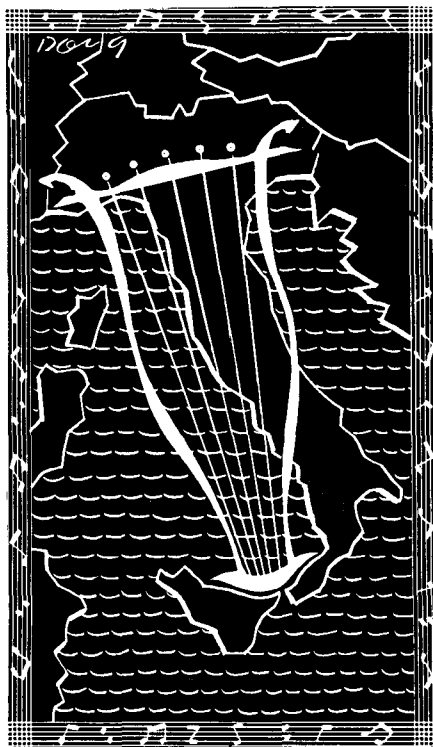
As well as welcoming the enterprising of all lands who were drawn to the mythical lyreside, Italy exported its arts as methodically as any other country exports a surplus of its marketable commodity. Jean-Baptiste Lully went to

Paris in the seventeenth century to become the favorite composer of Louis XIV and influence the shape of French music for decades. Domenico Scarlatti went to the Iberian Peninsula early in the eighteenth century (first to Lisbon, then to Madrid, where he spent the last thirty years of his life) with results that still resound in the music of that area. Paisiello in Vienna, Rossini in Paris, Verdi in Russia, Costa in England, Campanini, Toscanini, and Serafin in America are examples of major Italian musical personalities who deeply affected the taste and preference of peoples far from their native soil.

NOR is such productivity confined to music. What is "Russian ballet," after all, save an outgrowth of Italian influences that were planted in Paris, transplanted to Moscow, and later rediscovered in Paris through the migration of Diaghilev and his talented associates? Whether in its earliest phase, when dancing came to the French court through the example of Baldassarino Belgiojoso (and the influence of Catharine de Medici), or in its later development in Russia under Enrico Cecchetti, ballet, internationally, has been deeply indebted to Italian initiative. It was under Cecchetti, as *maitre de ballet* of the Imperial Theatres, that Marius Petipa working with Tchaikowsky created such products as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Swan Lake," in a union of Italian, French, and Russian elements from which "Ballet Russe" took definitive form.

Thus it could be said that, for centuries, Italy was a five-letter word meaning music, as music was a five-letter word meaning Italy. But only a wilful sentimentalist would contend that these later years of the twentieth century could be counted among them, or that the identity of the "fives" on the highest level of creativity has been as strong in this century as in any one of four or five preceding. Even when measured against the world-wide decline of musical creativity (on the same "highest level"), Italy's contribution has been smaller in scope, numerically more limited than in times past. Something, clearly, has happened, since the flourishing times of Bellini, Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi through the era of Ponchielli, Puccini, and Giordano to the lesser mastership of Leoncavallo, Mascagni, Montemezzi, and Respighi.

Perhaps the first clue was provided by Rossini at the ripe age of seventy-five (the year before his death in 1868) when he said: "The Germans have always been at every time the greatest harmonists, and the Italians the greatest melodists. But from the moment



that the North produced a Mozart, we of the South were beaten on our ground, because this man rises above all nations, uniting in himself the charm of Italian melody and all the profundity of German harmony."

Verdi, too "young" in a sense to be influenced adversely by Mozart, too "old" a product of the Italian soil to be anything but himself, put it another way well along in his own life (1884, aged seventy-one) when, in speaking of the upcoming Puccini, he said: "He follows the new tendencies, which is only natural, but he keeps strictly to melody, and that is neither new nor old. But it seems that he is predominantly a symphonist: no harm in that. Only here one must be careful. Opera is opera, symphony symphony; and I don't think it is a good idea to insert a symphonic piece into an opera just for the pleasure of letting the orchestra cut loose once in a while."

The "new tendencies" to which Verdi was referring were, of course, those of Richard Wagner. In his perspective of music, Verdi could see that "new tendencies" were inevitable, and he welcomed them. But the strong will and enormous talent that enabled him to formulate his own attitude out of the "new tendencies" of his youth (Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti) and middle years (Wagner himself) were in no such abundant supply with Italy's younger men. The old surge continued for a while—but the decline that Verdi feared eventually set in, along with the confusion of objectives against which he warned the younger men.

Well, one might say, that's the way the wind blows. But in Italy's case it has a literal application to the lyre theme. Quartering about, the wind has in recent times been blowing from what Rossini called "the North," bringing in clouds of learning. Brushing against the spiked barriers of the Alps, they have precipitated a more than figurative mist on the plains. And when the inevitable reaction against Wagner set in, Italian composers imported that, too, from "the North," in the systems and formulations of Schoenberg. Some point to Luigi Dallapiccola as a foremost Italian exponent of Schoenberg's precepts. It would appeal to me a good deal more if it could be said that Dallapiccola is a foremost exponent of Italian precepts.

But there are no changes without some benefits, no losses that can affect a national character totally and unequivocally. Vocally, at least, a tradition persists in such splendid performers as Renata Tebaldi and Giulietta Simionato, Cesare Siepi and Fernando Corena, Graziella Sciutti, Cesare Val-

letti, and Tito Gobbi, plus such others as Mario Del Monaco, Giuseppe di Stefano, and Ettore Bastianini (who could be greater than they are) if it has dwindled among Italian composers. Moreover, there has been a renewal of esteem for an instrumental heritage too long undervalued. Such groups as the Virtuosi di Roma, I Musici, the Scarlattiana ensemble of Naples, and the Quartetto Italiano remind us that if anyone objects to characterization of Italy as a lyre, it could be altered to the shape of the violin, this being the land where the instrument attained its still unimproved perfection. Cellist Antonio Janigro, pianists Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Carlo Zecchi, and Pietro Scarpini are equal to the elite in the world-wide musical community, and the conducting list would be longer had the careers of Victor de Sabata and Guido Cantelli not been interrupted.

IF musical Italy, in a musical image, is now marking time, what are the prospects for a revival or a renaissance in the creative urge that has meant so much to the world in the past? One hope—I should not like to call it the only hope—is to make an end of sterile production of mere imitations of outside models (I suppose Italian "composers" will have to go through an electronic phase before the cycle is completed), to return to the native character, to the impulse to sing that has made the Italian voice and the Italian song unique and distinctive for centuries.

Significantly, it can still be heard in some products from the South where the mist from the North has not penetrated or failed to endure. Coming in from Sicily, the wind has brought such abiding excitements as Domenico Modugno's "Volare," which swept the world of popular music a few years ago, and, from a little farther up-peninsula, the enticing measures of Rascel's "Arrivederci Roma," d'Esposito's "Anema e Core," and Galdieri's "Non Dimenticar." All have that sensual rise and fall of the great tunes, mostly past but still present, to which the lyre gave birth, and none has failed to pass the world-wide test of acceptance. They may not weigh as much on the scale as an opera, an oratorio, or a symphony, but on the scale of musical values they measure vastly higher for freshness, vitality, and meaning than the total outputs of several "serious" composers that could be named.

Here, perhaps, is the essence of the matter. I doubt that Bellini or Donizetti, least of all Rossini (with his range from "Il Barbiere" to "Otello"), or Verdi (whose canon includes "Nabucco" as

well as "Falstaff") thought of themselves as anything but musicians, "serious" or otherwise. Each did the best he could, and left the adjectives to others. It would be a happy day if the lyre began to resound again, naturally, unaffectedly, most of all, Italianly . . . more Denza, less Dallapiccola.

A Messenger From the Horizon

By Thomas Merton

LOOK, a naked runner
A messenger,
Following the wind
From budding hills.

By sweet sunstroke
Wounded and signed,
(He is therefore sacred)
Silence in his way.

Rain is his own
Most private weather.
But surprise is his first star.

This stranger,
Our early hope, flies fast:
A mute comet, an empty sun:
Adam is his name!

O primeval angel,
Virgin brother of astonishment,
Born of one word, one bare
Inquisitive diamond!

O blessed,
Invulnerable cry,
O unplanned Saturday!
O lucky Father!

Come without warning
O friend of hurricanes,
Lightning in your bones!
We will open to you
Our noble door.

Open to rain, to somersaulting air,
To everything that swims,
To skies that wake,
Flare and applaud!

(It is too late: he flies the other way,
Wrapping his nakedness in rain!)

Pardon all runners
All speechless, alien winds,
All mad waters.

Pardon their impulses,
Their wild attitudes,
Their young flight,—their reticence.

When a message has no clothes on
How can it be spoken?

Film: The Italians Again

By HOLLIS ALPERT

WHAT began as Italian neorealism may shortly be known as the Italian resurgence. All indications are that, for the next year or two, we will be seeing an unusual number of Italian movies—some the work of a middle-aged contingent that includes such well-known names as Federico Fellini, Roberto Rossellini, and Luchino Visconti; others by newer directors like Franco Rossi, Damiano Damiani, and Valerio Zurlini. Not too long ago a sad requiem was sung over neorealism, the film movement that sprang up in Italy immediately following the end of World War II and spawned such remarkable movies as "Open City," "To Live in Peace," and "The Bicycle Thief." One followed hard upon the other, and we became aware that Italy was producing a cycle of films as vital and distinct as those that appeared in Russia during the late Twenties, when the boundaries of the motion picture were extended enough to create an esthetic of the cinema that maintains its influence still.

In fact, any history of the post-World War II motion picture must give the highest rank to the Italian movement, which gave us not only great films but a new theory to chew over.

The theory was home-grown, and even the catch word, neorealism, was created by Italian directors and critics, who used it in a way of describing a relatively consistent kind of work (and a way of working) by such dedicated directors as Rossellini, Visconti, deSica, and Zampì. The semantically inclined might have quarreled with "realistic" as a descriptive term, when what was meant was something closer to naturalistic. But the coinage of "neorealism" answered most objections. To the Italians it meant not only a breaking with their past film tradition, made up mostly of empty spectacle, vapid boudoir dramas, and sound tracks gushing out syrupy Neapolitan love songs; not only a clear-eyed examination of the world that remained to them after Fascism, war, occupation, and liberation, but the birth of a new conscience, which was translated into social awareness and a

concern for the ordinary man. What happened in the Italian movie thereafter may have, at times, been frenzied and chaotic, but the directors, quivering with artistry and an inspiration that had its roots in the dire problems of a post-war Italy, were entirely conscious of what they were doing.

It was an all but unparalleled bursting forth of a new kind of film expression. The historians will cite Visconti's "Osessione," made in 1942, as the bellwether of the new movement. Visconti, in what was clearly a plagiarism of "The Postman Always Rings Twice," used natural settings and a raw, bold style to tell a violent story that was as much Visconti as it was James M. Cain. The movie has never been shown here, mainly because MGM made its own "Postman" and succeeded in preventing the American exhibition of the Italian counterpart. Visconti, in fact, is one director we have been unable to evaluate fully. Now that his "Rocco and His Brothers" has proved to be one of the important Italian successes of the past year, we soon will be viewing it, and should be seeing, too, his earlier "The Earth Trembles," a long saga of Sicilian villagers facing the perils of the sea. Visconti had refused to allow the movie to be cut to a less taxing length, and it would now appear that he has had his way.

The banner of neorealism was waved



—Trans-Lux.

Scenes from "La Strada" (above) and "La Dolce Vita" (right).



—Astor Pictures International.