



Pianists Block and Lhevinne—Singers of the Week

IF LIFE is kind to Michel Block and he endures to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his debut with the New York Philharmonic, he will still be years short of the other pianist who was soloist with the orchestra for the first time in the same week.

That, in a capsule, is the measure of the achievement of Rosina Lhevinne, widow of the eminent Josef, who goes on adding to her career at an age (eighty-two) when most musicians prefer an armchair to the piano bench.

For Block this was a debut a year delayed, in the opinion of those who considered him outstanding among the pianists who reached the finals of the Leventritt Competition in 1961. Unhappily, this did not include the jury, which decided not to designate a winner. Undeterred, Block entered again the following year and this time was not only the unofficial but the official choice. His Philharmonic debut was among the winner's rewards.

Unlike most predecessors, Block (born in Belgium twenty-four years ago of French parents who moved shortly afterward to Mexico, where he was reared) presented himself not in Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, or Liszt, but in the D major Concerto (K.537) of Mozart. Block honored his choice not only with a fluent, easily articulated sound suitable to Mozart, but also with a youthful sophisticate's awareness of sense and mood. Of particular appeal were Block's grasp of the work's harmonic discursions and his ability to produce a first-movement cadenza of his own which suited exactly the place assigned to it by the composer. One could argue with a phrasing here, a little roughness of statement there, but the total of it was closely integrated with Leonard Bernstein's clearly defined direction in a wholly Mozartian way.

Mme. Lhevinne's performance of the Chopin E minor would have been remarkable merely for the assurance and agility with which she commands the keyboard, a model for many who have profited from her teaching. But there was much more than a surface to this shining accomplishment; lyric grace in the first movement, an elegant kind of sentiment in the second, and real vivacity in the "Cracovienne" rhythmic patterns of the finale. Unquestionably, the surroundings were more a challenge to her composure than those others (Hunter College, Town Hall, etc.) in which she has been heard during recent years, and the score before her was as

much a distraction as a reliance. Consequently there was more than a scattering of wrong notes. But the right ones made a pattern of thought and coordination that might be envied by many who are decades younger. Leonard Bernstein's program was made, otherwise, of Peter Mennin's "Moby Dick," the Martinu Concerto for String Quartet (Juilliard) and Orchestra, and Ravel's "La Valse."

Roberta Peters's opportunity to sing Zerbinetta in the Metropolitan's new production of Strauss's "Ariadne" came somewhat sooner than expected when Gianna d'Angelo reported ill in mid-January. The benefits to the production were predominantly dramatic, for Miss Peters's sense of comedy is sure, her touch light, and she adds a seasoning of spice to the mixture that is much in its conception. Vocally she gets about with ease and assurance, but the big aria ("Grossmaechtige Prinzessin") carries her to a range in which she becomes all but inaudible. The cast, and hence the results, were much as before, save that Sándor Kónya rather than Jess Thomas was the Bacchus.

The next evening's attraction was also Strauss, a "Rosenkavalier" that strained the credulity more than ordinarily as Rosalind Elias performed Octavian for the first time. The music lies well for her and she sings much of it with warm, beautifully focused sound. However, there is no known way for Miss Elias to disguise her physique sufficiently to suggest the Marschallin's impetuous young lover, and she lacks the skill in acting to overcome nature's generosity. Presumably this should be equalized in the stretches of the role where she plays the youth disguised as the servant girl Mariandl, but there was a stress on mugging and flouncing which tended to make the deception silly rather than entertaining. What Lorin Maazel did to beat Strauss's creamy score into a froth of sound put this "Rosenkavalier" cast (Lisa Della Casa was the Marschallin, Otto Edelmann the Ochs) at a disadvantage from the start.

The benefits of having two such able artists of French schooling as Rita Corr and Régine Crespin at the Metropolitan were reaped in the concert hall as well as in the opera house in a week that provided such uncommon experiences as Massenet's "La Navarraise" and Spontini's "La Vestale." The former was a part of the continuing series of French programs conducted by Robert Law-

rence in Carnegie Hall, which is building on the esteem quickly earned to announce an even more elaborate sequence for next year. The interesting revival of Massenet in a dramatic mood not usually associated with him was prefaced by an hour of Berlioz, which provided the high artistry of Cesare Valletti in the "Nuits d'Été." These are commonly considered the property of a soprano, but the texts actually suit a male singer more than a female. As usual, transpositions were required to bring the musical line within range of a single voice, but it was the transporting results that merited the effort. Berlioz's rather mundane "Reverie and Caprice" permitted David Montagu to demonstrate an extraordinary dexterity in the French violin style.

Crespin's command of the text as well as the music made her Julia a characterization to remember, but there was not much else of quality in the concert version of Spontini's best-known work, limply directed by Thomas Scherman. This is a score that demands breadth, boldness, and dramatic impulse, too much of which was left wanting by lack of coordination between the singers at stage right and the orchestra at stage left. If, as is stated, the pit at Philharmonic Hall is ready for use, why not use it? The present arrangement is awkward at best and, at worst, disastrous. Ara Berberian as the Chief Priest and Mary Davenport as La Vestale were the best of the associated performers.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

Crespin's Senta

THE Metropolitan's second "Fliegende Holländer" of the season was so polished that it made the first seem like a good dress rehearsal in comparison. (To those familiar with the Met's rehearsal schedule, this observation may not seem as facetious as it sounds.) Much of the upgrading, however, was due to Régine Crespin's first Senta anywhere, which proved most remarkable for the intelligent and realistic self-appraisal behind it. By nature, the soprano's weight—both physical and vocal—hardly suggests the innocent child Wagner imagined. But everything about her control of these variables provided that illusion. Crespin realizes the power of economy in movement and gesture, just as she knows the value of a carefully designed costume. An even greater asset lies in her complete vocal security. One may argue that the occasionally edgy top tones, typical of French sopranos, represent a technical blemish. Weighed in context, however, they scarcely diminish the impact of so purposeful a first effort.

—MARTIN BERNHEIMER.



BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

Getting a Charge Up San Juan Hill

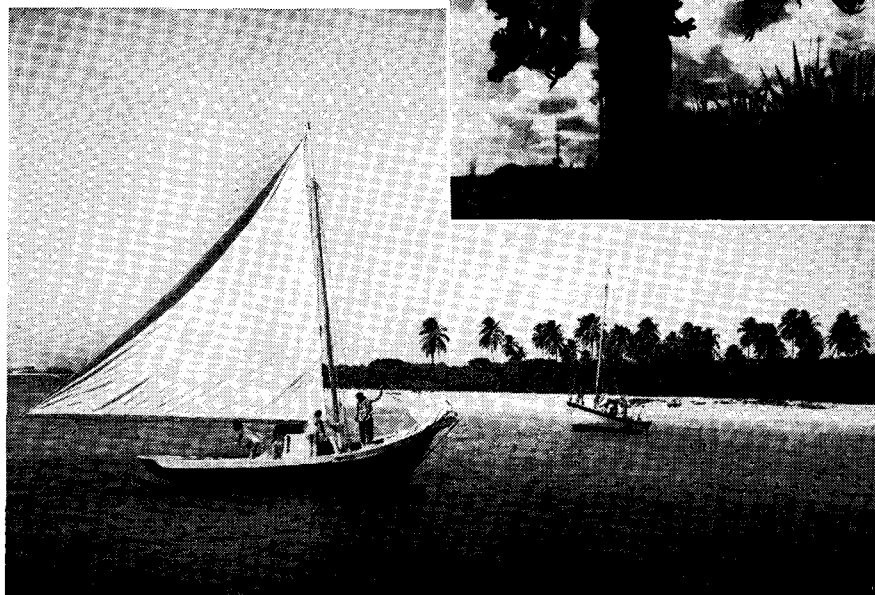
IT SEEMS, ah but the shortest of times ago that I was marveling over the tropical beauties of the new airport at San Juan, the spacious halls, the sensible ramps, the artful pools growing with reeds, all of which had risen while we were still landing and taking off in the slum conditions that existed in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington. It was therefore with some surprise that I chanced to read, in the plane buzzing over from Miami to Puerto Rico the other afternoon, that the airport was already too small, and that a board was looking into the possibility of expanding it.

I must say, once we were on the ground at San Juan, that the overcrowding became immediately apparent, not to say oppressive, and I was swept up in a swirl of surging humanity—sunburned surgeons running against the tide of pallid arrivals, but both following porters pushing handcarts piled with baggage. Dancing through these processions came whole troupes of Puerto Ricans who, should a fourth cousin, twice removed, be flying off to Mayaguez an hour away, are by custom inspired to descend on the terminal in busloads dressed to the ruddy nines for the farewell ceremonies.

My own arrival was abetted by a coterie which, as I contemplate it now, was only slightly smaller. It included a professional greeter from Pan American Airways, which, since it had accepted my money, felt obliged to see

me right to the door, by a female flack from the Condado Beach Hotel where I was to stay, by an American Express agent impressed into service by the hotel, and by a representative from the limousine company who had been importuned to act as his assistant. Between them all they managed to direct my elderly frame into a taxi, albeit without my writing machine, out of which I had somehow been flimflammed as I was being passed among all these helping hands. If the words seem to come now with more labor, it is because I have since discovered the pencil. It is easy to store, the overweight on airplanes is negligible, and if you lose one the insurance company doesn't even care.

The cab driver, who, for reasons I didn't altogether understand, had elected to make the trip for a flat fee only slightly higher than what the meter would have run, eased his way slowly into the line that was making its way to the *porte-cochère* at the Condado Beach. Some 4,000 people seemed to be on hand celebrating the opening of a new wing which had been appended to the hotel at a cost of \$3,500,000.



Sailboat coming up on Cayo Icacos; inset, Puerto Rican crabman.

—H.S.

The odd half-million, one could only assume, would take care of the evening's expenses. I dropped my bags in my brand-new Spanish colonial room, descended to the public halls, and as soon as an opening appeared in the human phalanx, I made for it and slipped over to Trader Vic's, which had been planted, since I was here last, in the basement of the Hilton's garden wing. With my lungs full of sweet Caribbean air, and my eyes filled with arts of Polynesia that adorned the walls, I needed only a few random tropical sounds to transport my soul into lotus land. Alas, a chorus at a large table nestling under the shark's jawbone, the Samoan kava bowls, and the hanging outriggers, was singing Mr. Alan Sherman's "Sarah Jackman" from the album "My Son the Folk Singer." Had Mr. Sherman himself been present, I have no doubt the choir would have been at work on that traditional Hawaiian numbers, "Sweet Salami" ("heavenly odor . . ."), while sipping a fancy rum potion heavily laced with Dr. Brown's Celery Tonic.

In the days to follow I made a number of excursions through new and old San Juan, the first of which, in deference to my hosts, took me through the hallowed halls of the Condado, now, happily enough, free of well-wishers. I was rather surprised to learn that the establishment, where I had never before engaged a room, had been built back in 1919 as a shelter for passengers from the Vanderbilt ships who felt they might welcome a day of firmness underfoot. It was, at the time, the only resort hotel in San Juan. For that matter, it was, save for the bizarre Normandie and the Pan American Guest House, the only resort hotel in town when I first landed here in 1947. I still remember vividly the acres of silver chairs which glittered in its ballroom. The only thing that startled me more on that first trip to Puerto Rico was the Normandie's swimming pool, perched as it was in the center of the lobby under the rooms that rose in tiers above it. Pan American built its guest house to accommodate its crew and passengers in proper comfort.

Those times had long since fled Puerto Rico. The Condado, always a favorite among the Puerto Riqueños themselves, now has a Patio del Fauno—a glass-enclosed garden room—an underground parking lot, and a lighted tennis court. Its bar has been stretched to the very limits of the sea, which cracks so close to the cocktail tables that you feel, when sitting down to sip a martini, you ought to be wearing a snorkel.

For reasons that may be clear to you but elude me completely, financial