



## Fonteyn—Nureyev—Ashton's Pigeon—Britten

LIFE with the Royal Ballet these nights at the Metropolitan is livelier than it has been on some occasions past, and not only for the obvious reasons. Its productions of *Giselle* (James Bailey's) and *Swan Lake* (Leslie Hurry's) have been upgraded, physically, over those seen in past years, and some of the choreography has been revised by Frederick Ashton and others. But, rather more important, when the evening's stars are not twinkling, such others in ascendance as Antoinette Sibley, Lynn Seymour, Georgiana Parkinson, Annette Page, or Graham Usher, David Blair and Kenneth Mason, are sustaining a standard rarely achieved at such length or in such depth in recent seasons, whoever the principals.

But, of course, the principals to see are Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev. As individuals, they command the balletic resources to make any effort memorable, but as partners they make a totality quite unforgettable. Considering what he is capable of doing, it was a challenge for the young Russian to stand aside, waiting his turn almost manfully, especially as Albrecht in his Metropolitan debut. When it finally came in Act II and he soared through variation after variation with a liteness and lightness of the princely kind only produced in a classless society, there were no unbelievers in his capacity to run the range of floor spins, air turns, entrechats, and grand leaps. His is a superb silhouette, perfectly proportioned for equal balance whether his hands are overhead, shoulder-high, or draped at his sides. All the movements flow from the solidity of his midriff, which is composed less of muscles than of coiled springs. As an actor he is still something of a languishing novice; but he is a brilliantly sympathetic partner, with the strength to make his lifts easily and decisively, and the power to sustain them in any attitude required.

Little wonder, then, that Fonteyn powered her way through both ballets with a zest and enthusiasm that added immeasurably to all the artistry traditionally hers. Her Mad Scene in Act I of *Giselle* was a promise of things to come rather more convincing to me than her playing otherwise of the mortal peasant girl. As the shade restored to earth in Act II, Fonteyn's simplicity and reserve made her response to its

classical challenges the more expressive for their identity with her disembodied state.

In the aftermath of numerous *Swan Lake* performances by the Bolshoi and Kirov companies, it was interesting to observe a decided upgrading in the effort by the present English *corps de ballet* (also noticeable in Act II of *Giselle*). Whereas such a Russian ballerina as Plisetskaya tends to be performing the Black Swan in Act II as well as Act III, Fonteyn is more the White Swan, in spite of herself, in both acts. A mere matter of emphasis, but also embodying something of a national characteristic. She performed her spurt of fouettes to a rising tide of excitement, but it was a dazzling attitude (on point) thereafter that had a sizable share of the audience cheering. Was it "Bravo" or "Margot"? The non-vocal part was applauding too loudly to distinguish one from the other.

WITH or without recourse to the *Fables* of La Fontaine, which serves as its literary framework, Frederick Ashton's new *Deux Pigeons* is a simple matter of boy meets Gypsy, boy does not get Gypsy, pigeon gets boy. The pigeons of the title are symbolic of the boy (painter) who leaves his girl (model) to pursue a Gypsy. With Gypsies, of course, blood is even thicker than wine, and when the girl Gypsy he has pursued is tired of being amused, he is glad to make his way back to the studio where his faithful pigeon waits. Presumably they live happily ever after (or until the next Gypsy comes along).

For the most part what Ashton has provided is an artfully insubstantial diversion of the Massine type, whose charm derives not so much from what is done, but from how it is done by the provocative Lynn Seymour as the model, the slithering, shoulder-shaking Georgiana Parkinson as the Gypsy, and the energetic Alexander Grant as the painter-pursuer. Ashton's one untoward inclination is to puff his little anecdote into a two-act, three-scene drama, which asks no little indulgence for some repetitious shoulder-shaking by the Gypsies and the sweetly inoffensive music by André Messager.

So far as her dancing is concerned, the appealing Miss Seymour can go on imitating a pigeon profitably until she is grown up enough to be a swan. This may not be the way things are ordered

in the ornithological world, but balletically they follow each other like the night the day (or *Swan Lake* follows *Sleeping Beauty*). Miss Parkinson dispensed Gypsy abandon as effortlessly as she simulated classic poise in *Giselle* (Zulme), which, plainly, marks her as a dancer with a future. Jacques Dupont's scenery and costumes are enough to serve an opera company for both *Bohème* and *Carmen*.

There is no doubt whatever that Benjamin Britten enjoyed writing the music for the artisans of Athens who come and go in the treatment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* now being heard for the first time in New York at the City Center. The proof of this is in the pleasure they provide whenever they come into view, the lift of zany humor they provide in the third-act version of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Quite purposefully an operatic spoof as written by Britten, it is well realized in the staging of William Ball.

This is all very good fun, and musically literate as well. Nothing gross, or even by the dozens: each effect is individually calculated, with Bottom (beautifully performed by Spiro Malas) as one kind of character, Flute (Richard Krause) another, and Quince (John Fiorito) still a third. Indeed, when Bottom is enjoying his moment of glory as the beloved-in-ass's-head of Tytania, he strikes a romantic note that might well have been sounded by the authentic lovers.

These, to be sure, had another problem to contend with, and a serious one. Britten has found some enchanting sounds (mostly *glissandi*) to set the stage for the enchanted woods orchestrally, and there are many suggestive devices in the instrumental elaboration thereafter. The problem for Lysander (Charles Hindsley) and Demetrius (David Clatworthy), Hermia (Marlene Kleinman), and Helena (Marguerite Willauer) is that this does not make for a very interesting vocal line, or a particularly singable one.

Britten has, on the whole, been more considerate of Tytania and Oberon. The Queen of the Fairies has some charming music to sing, and it was very well performed by Nadja Witkowska. William McDonald is not the countertenor Britten specified for the mischievous Oberon, treading the high range by adroit use of falsetto. For the non-singing Puck, the City Center has found, in Julian Miller, a bouncy young man who carries off the role appealingly without carrying on excessively. Perhaps the most troublesome part of Britten's conception is the boy's chorus of fairies. They have exacting music to sing, and though it was conscientiously prepared

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## A New "Boris"

### By Christoff

ANGEL'S new release of *Boris Godounov* in Rimsky-Korsakov's edition is, in essence, a stereophonic retake of a version done some ten years ago. Then as now, the central figure is Boris Christoff, the eminent Bulgarian basso. He repeats the feat of portraying the three leading bass parts in the opera—Boris, Pimen, and Varlaam. (Why omit Rangoni?) In a foreword, "On Singing the Three Roles," Christoff defends this undertaking with a modicum of modesty. It is strange that the public is less willing to grant musical versatility to singers than to instrumentalists. After all, a good violinist is expected to play Bach's Chaconne as well as Ravel's Tzigane, while singers are all too often "typed." Christoff is wholly successful in his characterization of both Boris and Pimen; the flexibility of his tone production, the ability to change the timbre of his voice, is particularly noticeable in the final act, during the confrontation of both characters. His Varlaam, however, seems a trifle too "arty" and lacks somewhat the earthy boisterousness so essential to this role. As Pimen, Christoff is restrained and dignified; as Boris, he is overwhelming. The entire gamut of power, anger, agony, and death is fused into a superb characterization that confirms his reputation as the outstanding Boris of our generation. At all times he conveys the feeling of complete identification with the role. Comparing his performance today with that of ten years ago, one finds virtually no change of concept. Here and there, a few histrionic changes were added for greater realism. At times, he abandons the composed recitatives and resorts to a *parlando* style that is effective if rather melodramatic.

Other parts are in capable hands. Dimitr Ouzounov's concept of the Pretender Dimitri is virile and dramatic, quite different from the sweet lyricism of Nicolai Gedda in the earlier version. Ouzounov misses some of the finer points, such as the *pianissimo* ending in the opening scene. In fact, his very first entrance is too explosive: his "awakening" (according to the score) suggests a nightmare, not a slumber. In his drive for power, he is apt to slip



Christoff—"The entire gamut of power, anger, agony, and death."

into some minor inaccuracies of intonation and enunciation. But his voice has a truly heroic ring. John Lanigan's Shuisky is smooth and controlled, although there is some strain in the high register of the final climax. Anton Diakov as Rangoni has some pitch trouble in his difficult first aria but grows in stature as the scene proceeds. The Polish princess Marina is sung by the young American soprano Evelyn Lear, who has a voice of outstanding range, evenly beautiful in all registers. She is at her best in the languorous duet with

MOUSSORGSKY: "*Boris Godounov*" (Rimsky-Korsakov version). Boris Christoff, bass; Dimitr Ouzounov, John Lanigan, Kiril Dulguerov, tenors; Evelyn Lear, Ekaterina Gueorguieva, sopranos; Mira Kalin, Ana Alexieva, Mela Bougarinovitch, mezzo-sopranos; Anton Diakov, Jacques Mars, basses. Chorus of the National Opera of Sofia (Luben Kondov, conductor) and Paris Conservatoire Orchestra conducted by André Cluytens. Angel monaural 3633 D/L, stereo S3633 D/L, four records. \$19.94/\$23.94. In Russian. (Spelling of titles, names, etc. as in the brochure).

Dimitri, while her opening aria is marred at times by certain vocal mannerisms such as excessive slurring. The song of the Hostess (Mira Kalin) is poorly microphoned; the interpretation lacks the earthy naturalism of the earlier version. The scene in the nursery is done with appropriate charm by Ana Alexieva and Ekaterina Gueorguieva as the Czar's children and Mela Bougarinovitch as the nurse. The Simpleton is sung affectingly by Kiril Dulguerov; yet the entire scene "near Kromy" (which originally ended the opera) seems to lose its impact by Rimsky's change in scenario. By reversing the order of scenes and by closing the opera with the death of Boris, Rimsky-Korsakov weakened the social significance of the work and emphasized the human drama. Indeed, it is not surprising that the exciting scene "near Kromy," with its rebellious implications, was cut by the Czarist censors after a few performances—"probably owing to political disturbances which began to break out now here and now there," as Rimsky remarked philosophically.

This brings into focus the whole question of the various "versions" of this work. On his recent visit to Moscow, Stravinsky attended a performance of Moussorgsky's *Boris Godounov* in the