

"A New Mood for Critics"

By RUDOLF BING

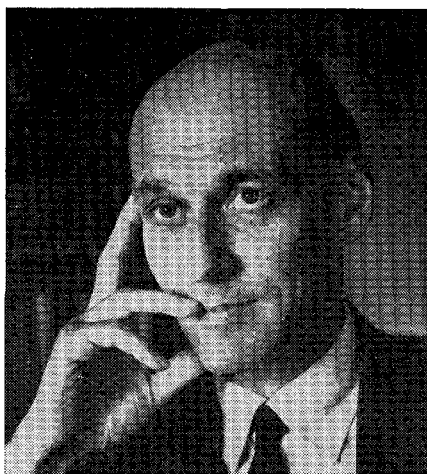
"**E**'QUAL TIME" is a comparatively recent phrase, dating, I believe, from radio and television, but it follows the time-honored tradition of fair play, of permitting the airing of both sides of an issue. I am grateful to Irving Kolodin and *Saturday Review* for granting me equal time in order to reply to certain questions raised in his article, *A New Mood for the Met* (SR, January 25).

Mr. Kolodin calls for "a disavowal of the thesis that a full opera house means an opera house full of satisfied patrons." This echoes a much less fair article, by Harold Schonberg in the *New York Times* of December 29, that says, "Perhaps the Metropolitan believes that the enthusiastic box office support is an endorsement of its policies."

It is an old grievance with music critics here. In spite of all their efforts, the New York operatic public makes up its own mind and, however bad the reviews, the Metropolitan Opera sells out. Mr. Kolodin suggests that this is because there is in New York City "no counterattraction." I cannot agree. I don't believe that anybody goes to the opera, disapproving of its standard of performance, just because there is no other opera in town at the same time.

Furthermore, whenever we do contemporary operas, such as, *The Rake's Progress*, *Vanessa*, *Wozzeck*, *Ariadne*, or even, some years ago, *Bohème* in English, the public does seem to find counterattractions. It certainly doesn't come to us. I, for one, find staying at home an immensely powerful counterattraction, open to almost anybody.

As I see it, there are only two possibilities for any theater: it plays either to full houses or less than full houses. If playing to full houses is no sign of approval, surely playing to empty houses cannot signify approval. So what does? Can Messrs. Kolodin and Schonberg seriously suggest that public demand, which over a fourteen-year period made possible the lengthening of the season by 50 per cent from eighteen weeks to twenty-six weeks, and which made it possible to introduce eight new subscription series and to increase the number of permanent subscribers from less than 7,000 to more than 14,000 (despite inevitable price increases), does not imply an over-all approval of the



Rudolf Bing—"praise I can live without . . ."

opera's policies and efforts? Has it perhaps ever occurred to these gentlemen that such overwhelming support of the Metropolitan may even constitute disapproval of *their* views and policies?

The *New York Times* printed a few letters in support of Mr. Schonberg's article, and he can no doubt produce more. (It is regrettable that so far letters favorable to the Metropolitan seem to get lost in the mail—although quite a few get through to 39th Street.) One should remember that people who are dissatisfied are very much more apt to sit down and write than those who are satisfied. I am not suggesting that everybody is always satisfied. In playing to approximately 25,000 patrons every week, I have never tried and cannot hope to please all of them all the time.

BUT on that subject I feel I can rely on my old friend Verdi. Of course he lacked the background and experience of a music critic, but he had qualifications that recommend him as an all-round man of the theatre. To one of my predecessors Verdi said, "Read the newspapers as little as possible. Journalists are good fellows, to be sure, but never in accord and while one says 'white' the second says 'black,' and when a third says 'red' the fourth insists it is 'blue'! What confusion! And whom must one believe?" (Was the old man describing Milan of the Nineties or New York of today?)

"Yes," Verdi went on to young Gatti-Casazza, "read the newspapers very little but read most attentively the reports of the box office. These, whether

you like it or not, are the only documents which measure success or failure, and they admit of no argument and represent not mere opinion but facts. If the public comes, the object is attained. If not—no." And he ended by saying, "The theatre is intended to be full and not empty. That's something you must always remember."

Let me go further. More than half of our subscribers are generous enough to add 20 per cent to their subscription payments voluntarily. A sign of disapproval? The Metropolitan Opera Guild and our National Council have not only substantially increased their memberships but have also increased their contributions by nearly 300 per cent since 1950. A strong symbol of dissatisfaction? And contributions from generous individuals have reached an all-time high—not just this year or last year, but steadily over the past ten years or so. Indeed, the sponsorship of individual new productions—something virtually unheard of before 1950—has now culminated in our first new production, *Aida*, sponsored (*i.e.*, paid for) by a business corporation.

SELF-PRESERVATION is the first law of nature. The Metropolitan must have sellouts to stay alive. With no endowment, no subsidy of any kind, we are engaged in a constant financial battle for our very existence. Even with an average of 97 per cent of capacity, a figure virtually unique among opera houses of the world, spiraling costs in every department leave us with an annually mounting deficit that a loyal and selfless board of directors must meet each year. It is very easy and almost irresponsible for a critic to pretend he is not interested in economics, but only in art; we do not live in a dream world but in a world of facts that cannot be ignored. It is distressing that two leading critics like Messrs. Kolodin and Schonberg—observers of the operatic scene in New York for decades, and critics who know the situation as well as any of us at the opera house—in their respective articles have not so much as looked in that direction. I cannot afford to close my eyes to these facts of life, and I cannot ignore the fact that our loyal subscribers are the economic lifeblood of the opera. I have unmistakable proof of what repertory the vast majority of these subscribers prefer. If I play too much of a repertory they do not wish to hear, I will achieve what the critics have so far failed to do—drive away our audience. If we lose our subscribers there would not be any Metropolitan to criticize.

Mr. Kolodin seems distressed that in my first season of twenty weeks we had a repertory of twenty-one works, where-

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six weeks, had only twenty-three works. I think it should be the goal of any conscientious management—and I know I certainly so pledged myself when I came to the Metropolitan—to produce fewer works and do them better. Whether they have come out better or not is a matter of opinion.

At any rate, I think it seems highly desirable that the potential of a production should be increased; while an opera in former years could be repeated only five or six or seven times without exhausting its box office potential, we can now perform some works in new productions twelve, fifteen, or more times during one season. This also enables us to spread the repertory and roster as evenly as possible over the entire subscription.

Mr. Kolodin, referring to the more frequent repetition of works, charges that “as quantity multiplies, quality tends to diminish.” Surely he must recognize that the bigger the repertoire the less rehearsal time exists for each individual work, and that there is therefore a far greater risk of slump in quality.

ON the subject of rehearsals, we continually read in the reviews that this or that work has been “underrehearsed.” I am unaware that any critic has ever taken the trouble to acquaint himself with the facts—either at the Metropolitan or elsewhere. However, if for example in Boston Alban Berg’s fiendishly difficult *Lulu* is performed, as was the case a few weeks ago, Mr. Schonberg in the *New York Times* had not a word to say about underrehearsing, even though only eighteen hours of orchestra rehearsals were available. When the Metropolitan did the same composer’s *Wozzeck* for the first time several years ago we had sixty-five hours of orchestra rehearsals.

Obviously I cannot argue about the quality of performances that I have produced, but I might be allowed to mention just a few names. In the years 1945-50 new productions were staged by Herbert Graf, Dino Yannopoulos, Lothar Wallerstein, and Desire Defrere. For the forty new productions during my tenure so far, in addition to the first two, I have added Margaret Webster, Peter Brook, Alfred Lunt, Tyrone Guthrie, Joseph Mankiewicz, José Quintero, Garson Kanin, Cyril Ritchard, Gunther Rennert, Nathaniel Merrill, Carl Ebert, George Balanchine, Gian-Carlo Menotti, and Franco Zeffirelli. I must leave it to the readers to judge whether or not this indicates some improvement of standards. Among the designers I have introduced to the Metropolitan were Robert Edmond Jones, Eugene Ber- man, Rolf Gerard, Oliver Messel, Cecil Beaton, Oliver Smith, Robert O’Hearn,

Teo Otto, Caspar Neher, Motley, Beni Montresor, Franco Zeffirelli. But again, it is not for me to say whether the visual standards have improved.

I am fully aware that we have no Toscanini, no Bruno Walter, and no Furtwängler on our roster of conductors; yet here again, I can only invite a fair appraisal of the world situation. I cannot breed conductors, but I maintain we had, have, and will have a fair share of the best the world has to offer.

On the subject of singers, I bow to none in the matter of casts. Again I wish our critics would take the trouble to see the weekly castings of two or three of Europe’s leading opera houses. They might come to realize that no opera in the world today matches the level of our casting; naturally, among some nearly 200 performances there will inevitably be an occasional weak one, but with few exceptions all the leading singers of the world were, are, or will be here—and not just for a few performances or during a special festival period, but for longer periods and more performances than these artists give anywhere else.

Naturally, all tastes are never going to agree. A singer I happen to admire may not be liked by one or more of the critics. The fact that they often disagree so wildly should be proof enough that the critic is not infallible. He may think he is, solely because we rarely have an opportunity to answer; and here I renew my thanks to Mr. Kolodin for making possible just that. And human nature being what it is, bad reviews are the ones that are quoted. I can think of few critical reputations that were not built on invective.

I do not for a moment deny that the Metropolitan’s repertoire is conservative. It has to be. The last time we did *Orfeo* and *Pelléas* we played to miserable houses. The difference between our average income and a “poor” house may be \$5,000. If we only have two such works, each performed perhaps six times, that results in a box office loss of \$60,000. Even so, we usually have at least two nonstandard works in every season. The critic has no responsibility whatever for the life or death of the house. I do; and if, by following the critics’ advice, I should bring the Metropolitan to financial ruin, I doubt if even the press would thank me for it.

Nor is our experience confined to the Metropolitan, or even to this country. The chairman of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, recently said in the British press that “whenever we get off the beaten track the attendances tend to go down.” Shostakovich’s *Katerina Ismailova*, which drew raves in the press, played to half houses the second and third performances. Average at-

tendance at *King Priam* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was 1,284 and 1,304 out of a capacity of 2,200. Both are by British composers. And that brings me to Mr. Kolodin’s brief on behalf of the American composer. The big house, whether the present one or the new one, can never be a tryout theatre. The economics I cited in the foregoing are simply against it.

YET I feel the Metropolitan is fulfilling an important cultural mission. Nobody is attacking the Metropolitan Museum for not showing contemporary paintings; this is not its function. The Metropolitan Opera’s function, in fact, is to show the classical masterpieces and to keep them alive for young and growing audiences.

If the press and others would divert a portion of their efforts to constructive, long-range thinking, perhaps one day the Metropolitan Opera might have a second and smaller house with a subsidy, where it would be able to turn to a more adventurous repertory.

Mr. Kolodin also mourns that “each accession (like *Wozzeck*, *Ariadne*, etc.) has cost us a valued friend of the past” and he mentions a few works that have been considered “standard.” Among a few others he cites *Der Freischütz*, *La Rondine*, and *Pique Dame*. If my readers would turn to the appendix to Irving Kolodin’s excellent *Story of the Metropolitan Opera*, they would find that *Der Freischütz* was performed all of seventeen times in six seasons and not since 1929; *La Rondine* thirteen times in four seasons, none after 1936, and *Pique Dame* four times in the season 1909-10, when Mr. Kolodin was two years old. He surely is loyal to valued friends!

Finally, as Mr. Kolodin invokes “a new mood for the new Met,” let me ask for a new mood on the part of the press—one that examines our efforts with good will in the light of all the facts; one that recognizes that a critic’s view is his personal one but not either infallible or necessarily shared by others; a new mood that reports honestly on the public’s reaction even if these manifestations contradict the critic’s opinion.

Praise I can live without. I often have; but I do ask, not unreasonably I think, for understanding.

EDITOR’S NOTE: The editor’s prerogative of having the last word is invoked here to make only one correction. With reference to the same appendix, “*La Rondine*,” “*Pique Dame*,” and “*Der Freischütz*” were not cited among the “valued friends of the past” but among “performable operas” that could be added to the list.

RECORDINGS REPORTS: Jazz LPs

TITLE, PERSONNEL, DATA

REPORT

American Blues Festival: Memphis Slim, piano and vocal; T-Bone Walker, vocal, guitar and piano; John Lee Hooker, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar; Willie Dixon, vocal and bass; Jump Jackson, drums. Decca DL 4392, \$3.98; stereo, \$4.98.

Kenny Burrell: *All Day Long*. Burrell, guitar; Donald Byrd, trumpet; Frank Foster, tenor saxophone; Tommy Flanagan, piano; Doug Watkins, bass; Art Taylor, drums. Prestige 7277, mono and stereo, \$4.98.

All Night Long. Same personnel except Foster replaced by Hank Mobley, Flanagan by Mal Waldron, and Jerome Richardson, flute and tenor saxophone, added. Prestige 7289, mono and stereo, \$4.98.

Gary Burton, Sonny Rollins and Clark Terry: *Three in Jazz*. Burton, vibraphone, with trio; Rollins, tenor saxophone, with trio; Terry, trumpet and flügelhorn, with quartet and quintet. RCA-Victor LPM 2725, \$3.98; stereo, \$4.98.

Panama Francis: *Tough Talk*. Francis, trumpets; Rudy Powell, alto saxophone; Seldon Powell, tenor saxophone; Haywood Henry, baritone saxophone; Ernie Hayes, piano; Billy Butler, guitar; George Duvivier, bass. 20th Century-Fox 6101, \$3.98; stereo, \$4.98.

Dexter Gordon: *Our Man in Paris*. Gordon, tenor saxophone; Bud Powell, piano; Pierre Michelot, bass; Kenny Clarke, drums. Blue Note 4146, \$4.98; stereo, \$5.98.

Al Grey: *Having a Ball*. Grey, trombone; Dave Burns, trumpet; Hugh Lawson, piano; Calvin Newborn, guitar; Robert Hutcherson, vibraphone; Herman Wright, bass; Otis Finch, drums. Argo 718, mono and stereo, \$4.98.

Johnny Hartman: *I Just Dropped By to Say Hello*. Hartman, vocal; Illinois Jacquet, tenor saxophone; Hank Jones, piano; Kenny Burrell or Jim Hall, guitar; Milt Hinton, bass; Elvin Jones, drums. Impulse A57, \$4.98; stereo, \$5.98.

Cyril "The Spider" Haynes: *Weaves Piano Magic*. Haynes, piano; Milt Hinton, bass; Osie Johnson, drums. Golden Crest 3091, mono and stereo, \$3.98.

Albert Nicholas: *Albert Nicholas with Art Hodes*. Nicholas, clarinet; Art Hodes, piano; Nappy Trottier, trumpet; Floyd O'Brien, trombone; Marty Grosz, guitar; Mike Walbridge, tuba; Fred Kohlman, drums. Delmark 209, mono only, \$4.98.

Shirley Scott: *For Members Only*. Shirley Scott, organ; with 13-piece band conducted by Oliver Nelson on Side 1, with Earl May, bass, and Jimmy Cobb, drums, on Side 2. Impulse A51, \$4.98; stereo, \$5.98.

"Packages" of blues singers now go on concert tours of Europe with the same kind of success jazz at the Philharmonic once enjoyed. This album derives from the 1962 tour and a Hamburg recording date that became a kind of blues jam session. When John Lee Hooker or Brownie McGhee is playing guitar, for example, T-Bone Walker forsakes that instrument and takes Memphis Slim's place at the piano. Walker makes an important contribution to the record. Whether singing or playing guitar or piano, he expresses himself with taste and feeling, and his unique piano commentary adds a great deal to "Let's Make It, Baby" and "Shake It, Baby."

These two sets were first issued in 1957 and have presumably reappeared because of Kenny Burrell's justly increased popularity. Each has one whole side—about seventeen minutes long—devoted to an improvised blues. The atmosphere, in both cases, is relaxed and the tempo comfortable, solo honors going to Burrell, Flanagan, Waldron, and Foster in that order. As on most "blowing" sessions, there are peaks and depressions, the latter being largely due here to the inadequate form of Donald Byrd. Evidence of organization, in the shape of occasional background riffs, suggests the obvious way in which these performances could have been strengthened and made more enjoyable.

The "infinite variety" of jazz, which the liner considers "one of the musical pleasures of our time," can also be an awful drag. Tepid vibraphonics by Gary Burton and caricatures by Sonny Rollins must be endured on each side before the listener arrives at two tracks by Clark Terry. His "Sounds of the Night" and "Cielito Lindon" have their moments, but "Blues Tonight" and "When My Dream Boat Comes Home," at the end of the second side, are very good indeed. Terry at his best is one of the special pleasures of our time and jazz like this belongs front and center.

Panama Francis is aware that the younger generation deems much of today's jazz unfit for dancing, and here he has gone to some pains to rectify the situation. Themes—some of them decidedly corny—by Sacha Distel, Henry Mancini, Randy Weston, Duke Pearson, Benny Golson, Nat Adderley, Ray Charles, and Milt Jackson are played with a strong beat and enough repetition to establish them in the teen-age ear. In between, there are trumpet, tenor, soprano, baritone, and piano solos, but what makes the good Panama so marvelous as a leader is that he doesn't overplay. Though his drums are heard and felt with satisfaction throughout the record, there is never a drum solo. The best and final track is Panama's Party."

Like his musical superior, Wardell Gray, Dexter Gordon was originally a disciple of Lester Young. Like Gray, he turned to the delights of bop with deleterious effect. After some years of absence from the scene, his return has been enthusiastically welcomed. The years between were clearly not ill spent, for his playing is technically more proficient and his conception, as he himself insists, "more lucid." The true star of the record, however, is Bud Powell, whose solos are distinguished by real individuality and irresistible drive. His talent dwarfs Gordon's, especially on the two ballads.

There are typically robust trombone solos (open and plunger-muted) by Al Grey in this set, two brief but striking muted passages by Dave Burns, and further evidence of Calvin Newborn's increasing artistry. The material, significantly, includes several popular rock-'n'-roll numbers, complete with their hypnotic rhythm patterns. These obviously have a restricting effect upon jazz musicians accustomed to a more flexible type of accompaniment, and the result is a musically inconclusive tug-of-war. What is perhaps indicated here is the beginning of a new phase, a *mésalliance* with rock-'n'-roll in succession to those with gospel and bossa nova.

Hartman, one of the successors to Billy Eckstine discovered by Earl Hines, is a relaxed singer with an attractive and masculine vocal quality. Though his forte would appear to be the ballad, this jazz context suggests that the time may be ripe to try again the formula Teddy Wilson and Billie Holiday proved so successful. That is, one where singer and instrumental soloists work on equal terms. For that matter, there was never anything intrinsically wrong with the idea of the *single* vocal chorus. Hartman does well here with "Don't You Know I Care?," Harold Arlen's "Sleepin' Bee," and the title song, but "Charade" and "Our Time" are best skipped. Illinois Jacquet, who is a model of discretion in the very professional accompanying unit, sounds particularly good on "Don't You Know I Care?"

One-time pianist with the Savoy Sultans, Haynes has an eclectic style in which old and new sometimes sit uneasily side by side: the rolling "Globetrotters" and the fine, moody "Worried Spider Blues." His feeling for delicate melody recalls that of earlier masters like Willie "The Lion" Smith, and the contrasts he creates on the fragrant but old-fashioned line of "The Flower and the Spider" are very engaging. Milt Hinton and Osie Johnson support him vigorously, but the latter's drums are at times too prominently recorded.

Until Barney Bigard returns to activity, Albert Nicholas is the best of the New Orleans clarinetists to be heard nowadays. As a soloist, he was more extensively featured in the earlier quartet record with Art Hodes (Delmark 207), but here he illumines the traditional three-horn ensemble with freshness, taste, and undiminished assurance. A graceful player with good technique and a mellow, pleasing tone, he uses his instrument's different registers very artistically for dramatic and color contrasts. The indomitable Hodes maintains the manner and spirit of Chicago's yesterdays at the piano, but O'Brien, though he discharges his ensemble duties ably, is a less incisive soloist than he was thirty years ago.

The first side puts Shirley Scott in the same sort of brassy settings Oliver Nelson has previously provided for Jimmy Smith on Verve. She seems to have had no difficulty in making the necessary adjustment, for she swings spiritedly on two shouting Nelson originals, and with finesse and appropriate feeling on a new Ellington number, "Blue Piano." With the trio, she establishes and sustains an excellent blues mood on the six-minute openings selection. Unlike many blues performances that are marred by overstatement, this builds to a climax casually and then just as casually diminishes in intensity.

—STANLEY DANCE.