

The Callas-Corelli-Gobbi *Tosca*

CYCLES OF SEVEN have long been known to exercise a mystical influence which, when multiplied by the special mystical attraction cast by Maria Callas, produced the kind of hysteria that prevailed when she returned to the Metropolitan Opera for the first time since 1958 in a *Tosca* with Tito Gobbi and Franco Corelli. Between the *haut monde* in the expensive seats and the standees who had endured a forty-eight-hour vigil for their places, the atmosphere was not unlike that of the first game of a World Series, in which the loudest applause is for the foul balls.

There was, in consequence, more than a casual amount of variable singing in the first act and part of the second, as the accumulated excitement inclined to isolate the performers from each other rather than to draw them together. But when the moment of reckoning approached and the temperature of the drama rose, it induced the wanted fusion, especially when Corelli as Cavaradossi had been dragged off and the stage was left to Callas and Gobbi.

Adroitly, expertly, skilled by long experience together, they played to each other's strength till it was no longer Callas and Gobbi but *Tosca* and Scarpia in their immemorial contest. Inevitable as the outcome had to be, when the curtain fell on her stumbling figure backing out the door from the room where Scarpia lay dead, everybody knew why Callas is Callas.

This was no sudden spurt to the finish line for a dramatic effect, but the inexorable period to a long, artfully constructed paragraph of characterization. It had its beginnings in the hostility that bristled in her entrance, her suspicion of a "reason" (female) why Cavaradossi kept her waiting at the chapel door. It turned as quickly to melting tenderness and as suddenly surged to irritation because he was preoccupied and inattentive. By the end of the act, when she was dabbing her eyes in vexation with his seeming deceit, the statement had been clearly made—Floria *Tosca* was a creature of moods and impulses, as unpredictably apt to chide one who blasphemed before the Madonna as to forgive her own offense, with a vengeful core beneath the overlay of sanctity.

All this is in the text, of course, but not much of it is in the average *Tosca*, or even those above-average ones who have more beauty of sound to dispose than Callas has, and thus an easier access to audience sensibilities. As she

worked on, she left both average and above-average *Tosca* far behind, as one small detail and then another were woven into her texture of purpose. The best and most original came just where Sardou's play ordained, and Puccini's score confirmed, that it should be.

How *Tosca* discovers the knife with which she destroys Scarpia is left, mostly, to the individual performer. Callas differed from all the others in the simplest way. She did not discover the knife. The knife discovered her. As she stood at the table, a wine glass at her lips to refresh herself after the tussle with the policeman-lecher, the metal was transformed to a glint in her eyes. A slight hesitation in putting the glass back on the table, a small inclination of the body (nothing gross enough to attract the attention unless one were watching her closely) gave a whisper of the plan forming itself in her mind. It remained but a plan until Scarpia approached; she lunged for the object on the table and in the same motion plunged it into his chest. It was the only way a moody, impulsive, unpredictable *Tosca* could have done what she had to do, when the vengeful core erupted through the sanctity that enclosed it. Thus was finalized the statement of character which Callas had begun some two hours before.

Of course, during all this time she was singing a good deal, with a vocal resource that seemed under better discipline though with substantially less expressive power than when she was last heard (also as *Tosca*) on this stage. What seems probable is that Miss Callas has composed her vocal problem by adopting a production that gives her, for this kind of a role, access to all the notes she needs. But it is without question a hard sound, with fewer variations of color and inflection than she once possessed. When it came to straightforward singing, as in "Vissi d'arte," it was neither beautiful nor beguiling. Rather than being the high point of the effort, as it is for some, it was, with Callas, merely an incident (for all the applause it evoked in certain areas). But where others may falter, she excelled, which gave her effort its own inimitable stamp of dramatic authenticity.

For his part, Gobbi was also at his best where it counted most—at the crux of the drama. He was not quite so resolute in his plan as Callas, deviating to a sortie of sound now and then, as at the end of Act I and the beginning of Act II, which confirmed rather than denied that

his vocal reservoir is running drier all the time. However, there is so much cunning in his basic plan, so much skill in his visual implementation of it that he, too, can exchange vengefulness for sanctity and make both equally vivid. Indeed, Gobbi even conveys the idea that Scarpia's zest for violence is psychopathic rather than merely wilful, thus completing the equation of conviction.

In this kind of company, Corelli was more often than not merely a tall man with a loud voice, buying audience favor with such childish coin as long-held top notes and, for variety, longer-held top notes. Given his physical advantages and the power of sound he commands, Corelli could make himself a painter-hero of the first rank, but this would take an alteration of attitude for which there is no reasonable hope. There was a moment, during their "love scene" in Act I as Corelli mussed the Callas coiffure more than the text suggests, when it seemed possible that she might have to kill him before she got to Scarpia, but the mood passed. Amid the adult happenings around him, Corelli's rather juvenile approach to the problem marked him as more than a little retarded—though not by conductor Fausto Cleva, who gave the tenor as much latitude for his sins as he did Callas and Gobbi for their virtues.

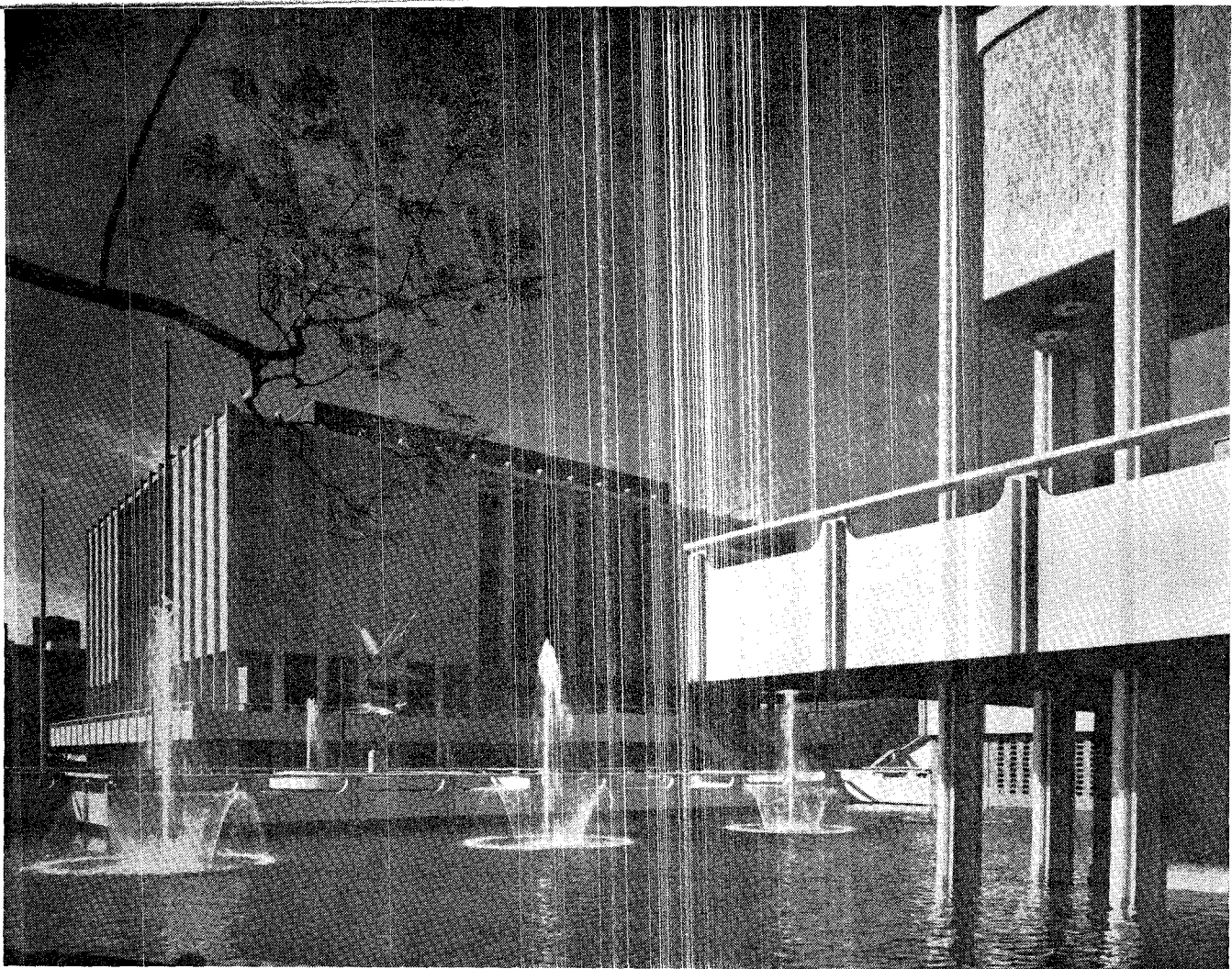
It was, unquestionably, a night to remember, especially on the next night when *Tosca* seems dull and lacklustre, due to no fault of Sardou, or Illica and Giacosa, who transformed his play into a libretto, or, least of all, Puccini.

THE revolving personnel of the Met's revolving repertory brought with it, during the week, a new Dalila and Amneris from Rumania named Elena Cernei. Her prominent assets are a sound of an appealing, dusky quality through its mid-range and a bright, expanding top, plus sufficient youthfulness to make a plausible figure of her Dalila, even an attractive one of her Amneris. She does not have the solidity at the bottom to make it audible in such a big theater as the Metropolitan, nor is she as yet as assured, dramatically, as one would like to see on this stage. But her merits are sufficient to warrant further attention.

In this hearing of Saint-Saëns's score, Jon Vickers made a striking figure of Samson and performed better, vocally, than he has in a non-German work previously. Both the style and the vocal layout of the part suit him, and he made an especial effect with the pealing pronouncement at the climax of Act II. William Walker was the High Priest. However, the French style in this production has virtually vanished with the replacement, as conductor, of Georges Prêtre with Fausto Cleva.

—IRVING KOLODIN.





Los Angeles County Museum of Art—a new focus for accomplishment?

—Julius Shulman.

## Los Angeles: Salute to a New Museum

By KATHARINE KUH

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Even before it opened, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art became front-page news all over the world in connection with the acquisition by the Norton Simon Foundation of Rembrandt's portrait of Titus at a London auction for \$2,234,400, and the announcement that the painting would receive its first U.S. showing at the new museum. The following is a report on the museum by SR's art critic.*

**L**OS ANGELES, its vast metropolitan area sprawling from sea to mountains, is boiling these days with art activity. If less refined than its northern neighbor, San Francisco, it is also less provincial and ingrown. One senses a volcanic potential here, but a potential limited by contradictions. Vulgarity threatens invention; quantity often overwhelms quality; nature, still opulent though fast losing ground, battles man-made banalities. Characteristic is Wil-

shire Boulevard, that tarnished golden artery where Hollywood and Edward Durrell Stone, a favorite influence in this area, join forces in an unlikely alliance. A recent Stone building features faked painted windows, outpacing even film-land's artificiality.

Opening this week on the same frenetic boulevard is Los Angeles's new County Art Museum, the largest American gallery to be erected since the National Gallery was completed in Washington twenty-four years ago. Distinguished by three pavilion-like structures set on an open sculpture plaza and surrounded by reflecting pools, the museum is eminently suited to the climate and landscape of Southern California. On one side it faces a dynamic city; on the other, light-struck mountains and luxurious vegetation.

While the basic conception of the new museum is exemplary, offering the most modern facilities and varied services, esthetically its design is insensitive, even structurally obtuse. Though one never

feels hemmed in, though spirit and eyes are constantly refreshed by visual snatches of the outside world, the total impact is singularly oppressive. It would take a spectacular collection to overcome this heavy-handed architecture.

Here, again, is a paradox, for over the years the Los Angeles County Museum has accumulated some fine works of art, but as yet these works do not add up to a collection. What one misses is continuity, direction, and consistent quality. Historically there is good reason for these lacks. Heretofore the Art Museum was merely one section of a large institution known as the Los Angeles County Museum of History and Science. Uncomfortably located in Exposition Park and housed in a musty old building where one wandered through corridors of stuffed animals and scientific exhibits before encountering a work of art, the collection understandably played a relatively small role in the city's life. It was a major problem to reach the museum and an even greater problem to isolate