

# With Bing to Lincoln Center

***The Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1966: A Candid History*, by Irving Kolodin (Knopf, 762 pp. + xlvii, \$15), holds that a power vacuum between performers and administration is the basic reason for inferior opera at the Met. Marcia Davenport, the author of the first American biography of Mozart, is a frequent commentator on Metropolitan broadcasts.**

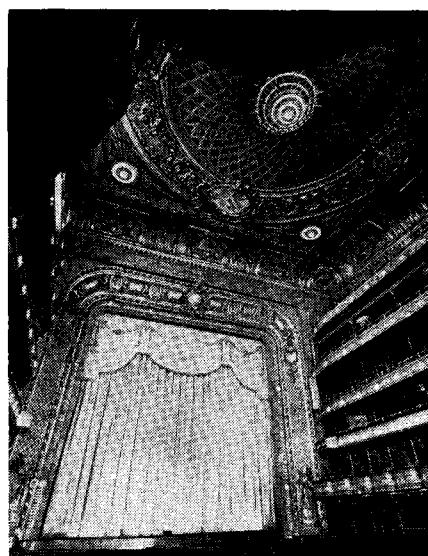
By MARCIA DAVENPORT

IRVING KOLODIN combines intimacy with objectivity, authority with perspective in *The Metropolitan Opera*, the two previous editions of which have each in their time been the standard reference work on the subject. Well-organized, scrupulously researched, accurate, the chronicles are marked by immediacy—a quality that is particularly surprising in the author's narration of the years before he was born or when he was too young to have heard Metropolitan performances. In these early sequences Mr. Kolodin frequently quotes his mentor, the late great critic W. J. Henderson of the *New York Sun*. This is all to the good, setting a tone of astringent, succinct candor. Mr. Kolodin continues in this vein after he is, so to speak, on his own as successor-survivor to Henderson. His factual asides concerning the Met and its artists are invaluable; and even though there may be disagreement with assertions that are his personal opinion, these are provocative, too.

The present book contains all the material in the two previous works—*The Metropolitan Opera*, which takes the company from its inception in 1883 to 1935, and *The Story of the Metropolitan Opera*, which continues the account to 1950. For current review purposes the latest updated edition may be said to begin on page 497, with the section entitled "With Bing to Lincoln Center, 1950-1966." The scrutiny comes at a time when the public is acutely Metropolitan-conscious. Every performance is sold out regardless of opera and cast. It is nearly impossible for the general public to buy tickets for performances of their choice. Admission prices have again been raised to meet a three-million-dollar miscalculation in the first season's budget. One cannot dine inside the opera house on less than two weeks' notice to the restaurants. At evening's

end that large part of the public which cannot afford to hire a chauffeured car and does not wish to use the subway is cast into a wilderness: the Lincoln Center garage, which is not reserved exclusively for patrons of the Center's buildings, holds disastrously fewer cars than it should, and taxicabs are not to be had. These are not irrelevancies. They are cited by way of weighing whether high standards of performance are to prevail over the excitement about a spectacular theater. Mr. Kolodin would not answer unconditionally in the affirmative, and neither would anyone else to whom musical quality has precedence over the wonders and marvels of the new house.

**P**ROLIFERATING affluence and the so-called "culture explosion" may insure that the Metropolitan continues to be sold out for every performance, good, bad, and indifferent—as too many are. This would be catastrophic for the company as an artistic entity. No negligible factor in these considerations is the New York City Center Opera, to which, in recognition of its special character, Mr. Kolodin gives proper attention and documentation. The danger is that without the corrective of adverse public reaction to poor performances, weak casts, and inept conducting, New York might wind up with mostly inferior opera at the Metropolitan. It has always had bad



—©Sylvania Electric Products, Inc.

**Interior of old Metropolitan Opera House showing the famous golden curtain—"Every performance is sold out regardless of opera and cast."**

opera some of the time but it has also had excellent opera. It still has. Mr. Kolodin's meticulous breakdown of season-by-season repertoire and performance thoroughly documents this.

In his epilogue he specifies the basic flaw in the Metropolitan's present epoch: the power vacuum between performers and administration, which in earlier régimes was filled by strong conductors. Even if there were not a world-wide dearth of good let alone great operatic conductors, it is doubtful that Mr. Bing would give such an artist the authority that in the past has wrought unforgettable performances. An operatic conductor's achievement is unique—or should be. His concept of the work and its execution is the living opera; all the contemporary fuss over visual and theatrical revolution, all the influence of *Regie-Theater*, is basically anti-musical and anti-operatic.

Mr. Kolodin refers repeatedly to the present management's obvious policy of divide-and-rule. Conductors are not permitted permanent identification with the works to which they are best suited. Mr. Bing constantly shifts the conductors' assignments as though they were bit-singers in minor parts. Basic repertoire works like *Aida* and *Don Giovanni* get a different conductor every year—sometimes several in one season. Consequently there can be no coherence, no enduring polish to their performances. New sets and costumes and staging, the best voices in the world, cannot rise above confusion and insecurity at the conductor's desk. As Mr. Kolodin observes, "money spent on acquiring a sound and responsible group of conductors *who would merit respect as well as demand it*, would yield vastly more widespread results than the money spent on a new production (the second!) of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*."

**N**EVERTHELESS Mr. Kolodin acknowledges Mr. Bing's achievement. His devotion to Verdi's less familiar works has in turn won him devotion from American music-lovers. His opening the Metropolitan to Negro artists was admirable and just, as was his flat-handed rejection of Southern demurs when spring tours were being planned. His firing of Maria Callas (spicily narrated by Mr. Kolodin) delighted as many people as it angered. The Bing régime has its own personality, and this—up to the closing weep-fest in the old house—makes interesting reading in Irving Kolodin's permanent repository of the Metropolitan's history.

To it is appended a compilation of the works performed in the lifetime of the Metropolitan, with the number of performances each year. The book is well indexed and profusely but unimaginatively illustrated.

# The Battle of Words Over the War

*Vietnam North*, by Wilfred G. Burchett (International. 191 pp. Hardbound, \$4.95. Paperback, \$1.85), *Washington and Vietnam: An Examination of the Moral and Political Issues*, by Dorothy Dunbar Bromley (Oceana. 120 pp. Hardbound, \$3.50. Paperback, \$1.45), *Why Vietnam?*, by Frank N. Trager (Praeger. 238 pp. \$4.95), and *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, by Douglas Pike (MIT Press. 490 pp. \$8.95), comprise a cross section of current thought on the crisis in Southeast Asia. William Henderson is manager of International Government Relations for the Mobil Oil Corporation and editor of the new quarterly *Vietnam Perspectives*.

By WILLIAM HENDERSON

THE FLOOD of recent books on Vietnam threatens to inundate us. To the extent that they reflect the perplexity of the American people over events in that far-off Asian country, and a nagging doubt as to the wisdom of

United States policy there, we should of course welcome this continued effort at public enlightenment. The trouble is that the spate of reports, polemics, "readings," and other, more serious studies now being published constitutes such a mixed bag. All too few of them add significantly to the state of our knowledge about Vietnam; not many have new or penetrating insights to offer; some should plainly never have seen the light of day. What to read and what not to read?

The four volumes reviewed here represent a cross section of current thought and writing on the Vietnam crisis. *Vietnam North*, by the Australian journalist Wilfred G. Burchett, is little more than a Communist Party tract. Burchett writes well and easily; his report on two visits to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in February and April-May 1966, during which he traveled widely in the North and talked with almost everyone of consequence, ought to be interesting and worthwhile, even if inevitably tendentious and basically unreliable. Certainly his previous books on Vietnam afforded a mine of hard-to-come-by information for the careful reader.

But the present volume is much less useful. To be sure, the chapters on the economy, on education, health, and so

forth, do give some insight into how North Vietnam has adjusted to the exigencies of war. On the whole, however, the text is so overstated, so laudatory of everything the Communists are doing in the North and so denunciatory of United States policy and action, as to stretch the credulity of any normally skeptical reader. For example, Burchett inveighs incessantly against the aerial bombardment of the North. Admittedly this is a contentious issue, and thoughtful men may reasonably differ as to whether the United States should have begun the raids in the first place, let alone whether we should continue and even intensify them. Burchett's views on the subject are violent, to say the least. But the author would also have us believe that practically the only targets the American planes ever hit are elementary schools, hospitals, and leprosaria; and this is plainly preposterous.

More significant are Burchett's accounts of interviews with captured American pilots. The latter seem to be standing up superbly to the pressures of captivity in the North. The author apparently could not find even one who had cracked under the strain and who was now willing to trade denunciations of American policy for the promise of more lenient treatment. Even as reported by Burchett, these exchanges provide eloquent if unintentional testimony to the morale and training of American pilots. The author's final chapter, on negotiations and the terms of a possible peace settlement, is also very much worth reading. Written after lengthy talks with top Hanoi officials, including Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, it is a near-classic statement of the hard-line position and its underlying rationale from the Communist point of view. If these remain North Vietnam's minimum terms of settlement, we are still a long way from the conference table.

Dorothy Dunbar Bromley's *Washington and Vietnam* is the troubled outcry of a decent and honorable American of impeccable liberal background against a dirty, brutal war she does not understand. It purports to be a historical record of our involvement in the conflict and a serious examination of the moral and political issues at stake. It is earnest, sincere, and embarrassingly bad.

Presumably Mrs. Bromley would make no pretence at being an expert on Vietnam. Her book is, in fact, largely a pastiche of other people's material, more or less uncritically slapped together. She seems to have relied heavily upon the published works of Bernard B. Fall ("invaluable assistance"), Jean Lacouture ("illuminating insights"), and Marvin E. Gettleman ("an indispensable source"), and also on several correspondents of *The New York Times*, to whom she acknowledges a special debt. But while no

