

Seven Star *Giovanni*—*Mefistofele* Revived

A PERFORMANCE of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* may be one of several things—a concert in costume of some of the greatest music ever written, a series of star turns in some of the greatest parts ever conceived, or a mystical combination of both. That it was, in its latest recurrence at the Metropolitan, a closer likeness of the *dramma giocoso* described in the score than any but a handful of performances it has had there recently is a measure of the distance that separated it from the average.

For the unusual result, there had to be unusual circumstances. Dominant among them was the adroit combination of elements, familiar (Cesare Siepi, Theodor Uppman, Jan Peerce) and unfamiliar (Geraint Evans, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Teresa Stich-Randall, and Rosalind Elias) to an outcome rarer than perfection—which is to say, credibility. They had in common what made the performance uncommon: a keen understanding of the part each played in the drama, a superior comprehension of the detail each had to produce.

It was the kind of performance that might be remembered by one listener for one reason and by another for a totally different one. A special one, certainly, was the superiority of Evans to any Leporello seen hereabouts in years. It was his *Notte e giorno faticar*, annoyed yet envious, that set the tone for what followed, and it was his *Madamina* that prompted the first great outburst in a sequence that would have lengthened the performance by half had the old-fashioned custom of recalls and encores prevailed. From this beginning Evans evolved, scene by scene, a characterization as complete in its way as his Falstaff, and even subtler in its application of artistic intelligence. Sir John is, after all, the central figure of Verdi's cosmos, Leporello on the periphery of Mozart's. Evans has the personality to command the stage when it is rightfully his, and the grace to retire when it rightfully belongs to others.

In this he was the worthy servant of a worthy master. A fine *Giovanni* without a fine *Giovanni* is a contradiction in terms, and Siepi showed not only the courtly manners but also the aristocratic art to relish a servant of Evans's qualities. He has refined his playing of the part to the point where it equals his mastery of the music whether in the urgency of the Champagne aria or the insinuation of the Serenade. Best of all, he has attained the kind of characteriza-

tion that scorns the needless clowning that sometimes prevails (especially in Act II) in favor of an honest response to the abundant humors in the drama. Here, truly, was the kind of Don who could magnetize the ladies into something they had not been before.

In Schwarzkopf, Elvira had a proponent who was not only first among them in time (her infatuation predates the beginning of the play) but also the most tenacious in her devotion. She has long been the model of how this part should be played, and if circumstances have delayed her performance of it at the Metropolitan until she no longer can control the vocal line as she once did, the fault is hardly hers. It has become, dramatically, an even more consistent character study than ever, so that she can mediate, however irrationally, the Don's wayward impulses and humanize the demon by which she is driven. Vocally, she was under strain from the beginning, both as to pitch and tone quality, but by exercise of her close knowledge of the singer's craft she reserved her best effort for where it counted most—in the "Mask" trio, the sextet in the church scene, and, in her big recitative and aria, both full of fervor if tonally below par on this occasion.

Something of the same sort applied to Stich-Randall's Anna, a triumph of mind and spirit over limited means. Neither in volume nor richness is hers close to the classic voice for this role, but she attains, through sheer intelligence and a passion for precision, what may elude some with greater physical resources. From her first repulse of the intruder, she defines what she proposes to do; and she then proceeds to do it, as much in the recitatives as in the arias. Her knowledge of the vocal ground is so thorough that no turn of it presents her with a problem she has not studied and surmounted in terms of her own equipment. Thus *Non mi dir* was the musical as well as dramatic climax of her effort.

So far consideration has been devoted to those well known to the world stage of Mozart, from whom ultimate results can be expected. Prior to this performance, Rosalind Elias was not among them, but her first Zerlina elevated her to the elect, not only for beauty of sound but also for adaptation of it to a role not considered the province of a mezzo-soprano. But hers is a quality as much soprano as mezzo, as this effort demonstrated. As always, Uppman made a star's part of Masetto, and if Peerce can

no longer bear himself as a young swain should, he sustained Ottavio's musical requirements with the finesse of the vocal master he is. The Commendatore, and a good one, was the new basso, Nicola Ghiuselev.

For the flow and musical character of this *Giovanni*, virtue began with the vocalists but did not end there. With seven such accomplished performers, the requirement in a conductor was not so much for direction as collaboration, which Joseph Rosenstock provided in an unobtrusive but wholly effective way. Eugene Berman's setting, so often admired for beauty, assumed a new function as part of a theatrical whole.

Oddly enough, the week also produced an operatic work which has not been given at the Metropolitan in all the years since *Don Giovanni* made its triumphant reappearance in the late Twenties. If this suggests that there is some kind of parallel virtue in it that would equally reward re-consideration, the American Opera Society's concert version of Boito's *Mefistofele* in Carnegie Hall achieved more than its immediate purpose.

Nor is there any reason to wonder whether the Metropolitan has the resources to do it justice: this was virtually an all-Metropolitan ensemble, with Nicolai Chiaurov, Renata Tebaldi, and Carlo Bergonzi as the principals, and Lamberto Gardelli, who made his downtown debut before the week was out, conducting. Dorothy Cole, who performed Marta and Pantalís, has ready counterparts at Rudolf Bing's disposal, likewise the Wagner, Frederick D. Mayer.

When Chiaurov made his Metropolitan debut as Gounod's Méphistophélès, it was suggested that his broad, sardonic conception would be even better suited to Boito's treatment of this character. How much better was clearly apparent from his part in the prologue, and it grew and grew as the evening progressed. The voice and the music make a perfect match, and, even in circumstances where characterization was restricted to gesture and facial play, the outline of evil genius was visibly present. Bergonzi's superb sound suited this Faust better, perhaps, than anything he has ever sung here and Tebaldi's Margherita-Elena carried her close to the memorable standard of her early years, as long as she had the strength to sustain it. Gardelli had everything—chorus and orchestra as well as principals—going his way, which was, compellingly, Boito's too. Certainly it is time that the local estimate of this modest man be revised to give proper prominence to his exceptional abilities as a composer as well as to his literary attainments (the librettos of *Otello* and *Falstaff*).

At the Metropolitan, Gardelli's assign-
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Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Racial Reality and American Dream

IN THE summer of 1964 the University of California (Berkeley) Extension Program sponsored a seminar on "The Negro Writer in the United States," under the direction of Herbert Hill, author and teacher and labor secretary of the NAACP. Out of the seminar has come a book, *Anger, and Beyond* (Harper & Row, \$5.95), which Hill has edited. Saunders Redding, Horace Cayton, Harvey Swados, and Nat Hentoff discuss the writings of American Negroes in historical terms, while Arna Bontemps, LeRoi Jones, Robert Bone, M. Carl Holman, and Ossie Davis are concerned with the problems of individual writers. Jones, Holman, and Davis discuss their own work; Arna Bontemps writes about Jean Toomer and Robert Bone about Ralph Ellison. There is also a symposium on Richard Wright in exile, with Hill, Redding, Bontemps, and Cayton taking part, and an interview with Melvin B. Tolson.

Appropriately, it seems to me, the volume is dedicated to the memory of Alain Locke, who, almost exactly forty years ago, edited an anthology called *The New Negro*, which was an eye opener for a lot of people. In addition to poetry and prose by Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, the book contained scholarly essays by James Weldon Johnson, F. Franklin Frazer, W. E. B. DuBois, and others. Most of the writing was of high quality, and seemed to support the large claims some of the contributors made for the future of Negro American men and women of letters.

How have four decades dealt with the promises of 1925? It must be admitted that the Negro renaissance that Locke saw just around the corner is still a hope rather than a reality. But, on the other hand, there have been gains, not only in the political and economic status of the American Negro but also in his position in the world of letters. In the past quarter of a century three American Negroes—all primarily novelists, as it happens—have won both popular and

critical recognition not as Negro writers but as writers. They are, of course, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, and the presence of each of them is constantly felt in this book. Wright is regarded as an important pioneer and, at least in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy*, a highly accomplished writer; about his later years and later works there are large doubts. Baldwin at the moment is viewed with some suspicion on both political and literary grounds. The central figure at present is Ellison; *Invisible Man* is praised by several contributors, and there are frequent allusions to the essays in *Shadow and Act*.

THREE themes recur. First there is the ancient problem of art versus propaganda. So far as they recognize that there is a conflict, the contributors are on the side of art. Robert Bone, for example, attacks Irving Howe for deploring a lack of militancy on the part of Ralph Ellison. On the other hand, there is general recognition that propaganda and protest are not the same thing. Ossie Davis, author of *Purlie Victorious*, says, "The Negro in this country has to write protest, because he is a protestant. He can't help but be. He cannot accept the situation in which he finds himself, so, therefore, he is driven to scream out against the oppression that surrounds him, that suffocates him." The point is made more precisely in a passage that Hill quotes from one of Ellison's essays: "I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest. Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* is, among other things, a protest against the limitations of nineteenth-century rationalism; *Don Quixote*, *Man's Fate*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Trial*—all these embody protest even against the limitation of human life itself. If social protest is antithetical to art, what then shall we make of Goya, Dickens, and Twain? One hears a lot of complaints about the so-called Protest Novel, especially when written by Negroes, but it seems to me that the critics could

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more accurately complain about their lack of craftsmanship and their provincialism."

The second issue concerns the nature of Negro-American culture. Speaking as a sociologist, Horace Cayton states: "I subscribe to the school of thought that little, very little of African culture was brought to the United States and that that which the Negro did retain was isolated and died a rapid death. What I am saying is that the so-called American Negro subculture is purely a product of the Negro's experience in America; it is the American culture refracted through the prism of three hundred years of subordination." Nat Hentoff, on the other hand, denounces as an absurdity this statement made by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1963: "The Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect." Most of the contrib-