

—Sandor Acs.

The new Met—"The many enjoy considerations which were formerly reserved for the few."

MID-MONTH RECORDINGS

OPERA HOUSE ON THE AMERICAN PLAN

By IRVING KOLODIN

FOR THOSE who have watched the new Metropolitan Opera House on New York's West Side emerge from the ground of Lincoln Center, the principal impression is that it is *new*—new in textures and colors, spaces and facilities. Above all, it is an environment new in conception for a theater of its size and functions which will greet the audience that assembles in it for the first time on Friday, September 16.

It is conventional to say of something that stands as an impressive summation of its purpose that it "looks like a million dollars." Whether the opera building created by Wallace K. Harrison may be said to look like *forty-five* million, seven hundred thousand dollars—the latest quoted figure of its cost—depends on where one looks. In all probability (though no breakdown has been officially rendered) the largest portion of the bill attaches to the features that the audience will only experience, but never actually see—the multiplicity of backstage facilities (main-stage elevators, side-stage wagons, turntable, automated switchboards, giant cycloramas), car-

penry, painting and costuming shops, and rehearsal halls, plus, of course, the dressing rooms and other amenities that have been denied to the Metropolitan's performers for decades.

In the portions of the building that concern the ticket-buyers, millions have been spent to purchase an atmosphere of elegance and spatial abundance before the performance begins and during the intermissions; and, while it is in progress, better sight lines than might be imaginable in an auditorium seating 3,800; an orchestra pit that is, in effect, two (for Mozart it not merely contracts, but yields part of its front to extend the stage apron, part of its back area to accommodate an additional row of seats, so that it is, in effect, a different pit); and a freshness of air that may outmode some jokes about sleeping at the opera. A trial performance last spring left optimistic expectations about acoustics which are, however, still to be proved out in a wide range of repertory (some think it may also turn out to be the best concert hall in New York City).

Unlike most predecessors—including the famous one of the same name on Broadway which stands silently brood-

ing its future—it is more than a sea of space surrounding an island of boxes. There are boxes, and handsomely appointed ones, too. But they are one among other areas just as handsomely appointed, from orchestra floor to top balcony. As in other constructions of this century in Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, where the trend has been to better sight lines and fewer boxes, the many enjoy considerations which formerly were reserved for the few.

This spirit reaches its full expression in the Harrison Metropolitan. It is a one-seat house in the direct sense that each of its 3,800 places has been treated as the equal and equivalent of the others so far as the comfort of the occupant is concerned. But it is a one-seat house in the larger, philosophical sense that everybody uses the same entrances and exits, there is no physical separation of any level from any other, and no portion has been added as an afterthought when the preferential conditions of another were satisfied.

For those who will judge by its performances not its promises, the first contact with the interior takes in a wide arc of rings, or tiers, rising over a broad

area of orchestra floor seating. Given a horse with a foot of a suitable shape, it could be called a "horseshoe." But the conformations which gave rise to that description have been flattened out, re-contoured, and amended to suit the concept of it as an opera house on the American plan. When the seat holder closest to the wall in the rear row of the family circle looks around for the first time, he will discover that a full view of the stage is available, even to him. "Partial views" are not in the area of major capacity, but in fractional capacity in a limited number of side boxes. Even here, seating has been restricted to a narrow band at the front of the area, the seats themselves face toward the stage, and in some instances, the rear seats have been elevated to form a "box within a box."

UNLIKE the sight lines in conventional theaters, which converge at a point at the rear of the stage, the vista in the new Metropolitan has been conceived to center at the front of the orchestra pit. This not only assures the view of the stage that is wanted, but takes in, within the same line of sight, a prime personality in the success of any worthwhile opera performance—the conductor. There are those, whose opera-going has been mainly on Manhattan Island, who only know of a conductor by hearsay, rather than sight.

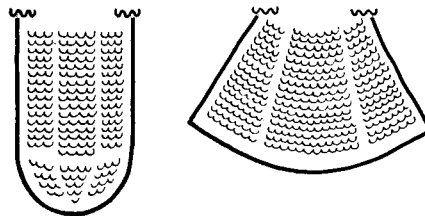
Proceeding to details, it may then be noted that, beyond widening the arc and flattening the curve of Pegasus's horseshoe, the design calls for pulling in the first rise closer to the stage than has previously prevailed. As the proportions are repeated in each rising tier, this brings the viewer from any given seat some 10 feet nearer the stage than previously. The extended capacity creates a larger area of seats under the overhang on the orchestra level than in the previous theater, but compensation has been effected through the acoustical paneling of the sides and rear.

For all the important part it plays in the enjoyment of the opera-goer, this may be the last thing that will draw his attention, after chandeliers (main and satellite), carpets, wall sconces, recessed ceiling, indirect colored lighting, etc. The good reason for this is that the deep rich red tone of the walls appears to be merely another aspect of the decorative scheme, carried out over a broad expanse of surface facing the stage.

Attractive as it appears, eye appeal is secondary to the functional purpose for the ear. For, as familiarity with the auditorium grows, so will awareness that it is, in effect, a paneled "room"—if anything so sizable can be termed a "room"—wood-covered from ceiling to floor. After exhaustive search, favor settled on a product of a West African tree

called the Babinga, from which is manufactured a wood known as Kevazingo. It was preferred not only for its texture and promising match for the color scheme of the auditorium, but also for its adaptability to the purpose of acoustical paneling. Remarkably enough, *all* the paneling that meets the eye is the product of the same, single, magnificent specimen, manufactured into veneers over a fireproof core known as Novoply. It is a single element, but a key one, of a chain of provisions (including the flaring proscenium, the recessed ceiling, the angled box fronts with roughened patches and concave undersides) designed to achieve a maximum dispersion of the sound created on the stage and in the orchestra pit.

Allowing for the variations of design detailed above, for a new, better orientation toward the stage (for many), and a new world of creature comforts, the opera-goer will nevertheless find much that is familiar to him. The stage open-



The drawings above were included with an article titled "Zero Hour for Lincoln Center" published in SR on April 25, 1959. It was intended to show the difference between an old horseshoe-shaped auditorium, such as the old Met's, and a fan treatment with vastly better sight lines. The auditorium of the new theater is very similar to the figure on the right.

ing, for example, is almost identical with the one to which he is accustomed, and as his eye roams upward it will traverse about the same distance (72 feet) before it encounters the ceiling. Then the houselights have dimmed, the footlights have come up, and a familiar looking gold curtain has swept upward in graceful folds, the visible stage area will be the same as the one that has always spelled "Metropolitan."

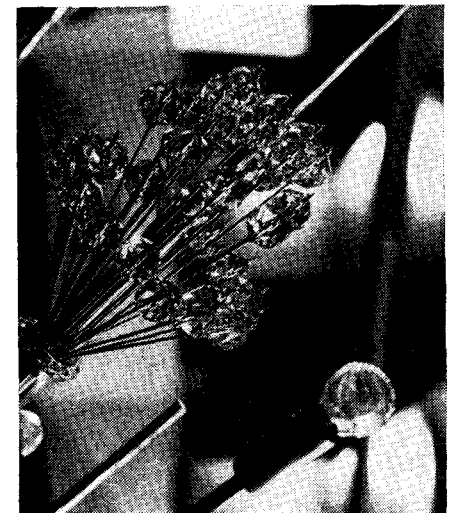
But the *invisible* stage area—that is another and wholly new story. An approximation can be rendered by the statement that in the first Metropolitan, the auditorium occupied two-thirds of all the space in the structure. In Harrison's construction, the auditorium—for all its size and increased seating capacity—occupies only one-third of the total space. The public will quickly evaluate what that means in the areas of its comfort and convenience; but the transformation of the backstage area has evolved into a wonderland of facilities and ac-

cessories hitherto unknown to opera in this country.

It is all of these musical, mechanical, and material factors which, together with its spare lines and architectural proportions, characterize the new monumental Metropolitan as an opera house on the American plan. Behind as well as before the curtain it is projected as a prime instance of functional design that will take a place of pride among the famous examples, world-wide, of man-made solutions to a man-made problem.

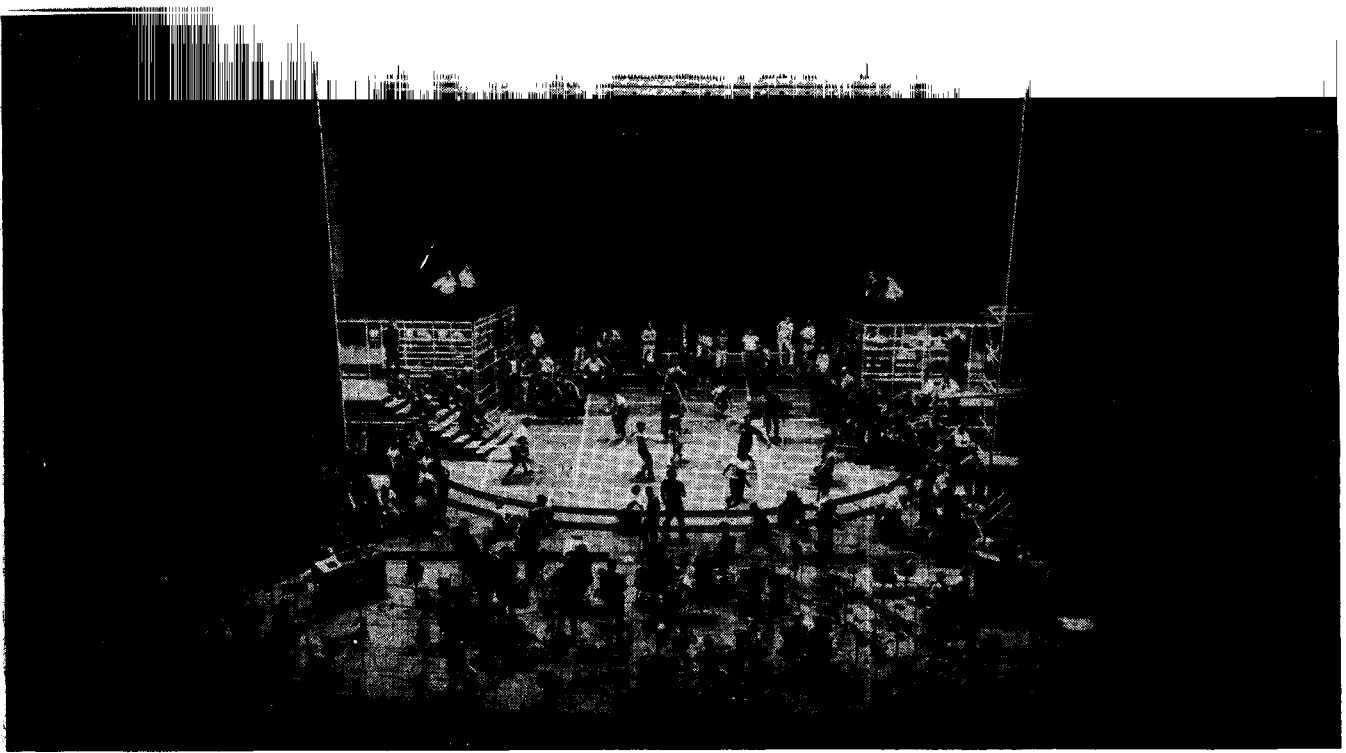
In many of Europe's prototypes—descendants of the original Teatro San Cassiano built of wood in Venice in 1637—historical data range through such details as when it was built, how much it cost, when it had its fire, and when it was rebuilt. One of the most famous, indeed, is called La Fenice (likewise in Venice) because it has risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of a predecessor. More recently, wars have taken the place of fires as causes for rebuilding, with the prides of Vienna, Munich, Cologne, Hamburg, Milan, and Warsaw—to mention but a few—newly rebuilt to make good the ravages of bombing.

But, as surely as the physical form rises again, so the lore and legend that cling to every theater rise with it. Whether concerned with *il loggione* of Parma (the "gallery gods"), the denizens of the *vierte* in Vienna (they grumbled, after the reconstruction, about removal of columns that had formerly resulted in "obstructed views" in the top ring being sold at cut rates), or the "standing army" made famous in the days of Caruso's supremacy in the nineteenth-century Metropolitan, they play their parts in the results that accrue. Thus, as the stage is set and the curtain is ready to rise on the Metropolitan of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, it is in surroundings worthy of the best on both sides of the footlights.



—E. Fred Sher.

A spoke on one of the Lohmeyr chandeliers presented by the Austrian government.



—E. Fred Sher.

A view of the stage during an early rehearsal for *Antony and Cleopatra*. The floor of the orchestra pit has been raised to the level of the main stage to facilitate the work in progress.

Birth of an Opera

By HANS W. HEINSHEIMER

SAMUEL BARBER, whose opera *Antony and Cleopatra* has been chosen to open the new Metropolitan Opera House, is probably the only living composer who does nothing but compose. He does not perform, he does not lecture, he writes neither newspaper reviews nor books, he does not organize music festivals, he is not at the helm of an opera company or a symphony orchestra. He is no professor nor a "composer in residence" anywhere but in his own house in Mount Kisco, New York.

Once, some fifteen years ago, he took conducting lessons and made a few records of his music in Europe. But no sooner had he listened to them than he decided and proclaimed clearly and decisively that he would forever leave the conducting of his works to others. As a young man he had a fine baritone voice, tried (in vain) to get a radio job as a singer and even made a recording of one of his earliest works, *Dover Beach*, for voice and string quartet when he was twenty-one years old. The recording, featuring the Curtis String Quartet and Barber as soloist, was issued by RCA Victor in 1936 and is now a collector's item. The baritone soloist has never sung in public again.

Barber was also and still is an extraordinarily skillful and sensitive pianist whose technique and whose affinity to the piano, matched by few if any of his colleagues, are reflected in the brilliant pianistic writing of his *Excursions*, a cycle of piano pieces written in 1944, his Piano Sonata (1949), and the more recent Piano Concerto (1962). But he never plays the piano professionally anymore, much to the regret of those who remember, among similar unforgettable treats, the first performance of Barber's song cycle, *Hermit Songs*, at Dumbarton Oaks in 1953, when the composer accompanied Leontyne Price in a beautifully paced, marvelously balanced performance, probably his last public appearance as a pianist.

Barber has chosen to live the life of a composer and no other life, and nothing will distract him. There is scarcely a day when he is not approached with requests to lecture, to attend or conduct a seminar, to teach a master class; but he steadfastly declines any offer to participate in academic musical endeavors ever since, in 1939, he let himself be persuaded to return briefly as a teacher of composition to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. The school is his Alma Mater, where he studied piano, singing, and mostly, of course, composi-

tion from the first day the Institute opened in 1924 until 1934 when, at the age of twenty-four, he won the first of many prizes that were to enable him to devote all of his time to composing—a Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship which, combined with his first Prix de Rome, made it possible for him to spend his first creative year abroad.

It would probably have been beyond human endurance to lead and carry on so dedicated a life if it had not been encouraged and facilitated by success. As one looks back from *Antony and Cleopatra*, which bears the opus number 40, to his early beginnings, the steady, sustained success of Barber's musical output is, again, quite a unique feature. There are no *Jugendsünden* respectfully filed away in libraries and never performed. When he was seventeen he brought a few songs to Schirmer, who promptly rejected most of them but published some, among them *The Daisies*; it is still, after almost forty years, one of the most popular art songs in the contemporary American repertory.

Schirmer told him at the same time that they could not possibly afford the expense of publishing his Cello Sonata, but they changed their minds when the New York Philharmonic played a new work by the twenty-one-year-old composer and when, a little later, his First Symphony had its premiere performance in Rome under Bernardino Molinari, an unheard-of achievement for a young,