—*Photos from Austrian Information Services.*

"Vienna wouldn't be Vienna without The Opera."

SR: RECORDINGS

One Hundred Years of the Opera On the "Ring"—1869-1969

By ILSA BAREA

This is not the centenary of opera in Vienna, or of Viennese opera. It is the centenary of the architectural shell nowadays called the Vienna State Opera or, more popularly, *The* Opera, as if there were no other in the city. It was inaugurated with the pomp and circumstance of the period on May 25, 1869, under the name of the Imperial-Royal Court Opera Theater, k. k. Hofoperntheater, with a gala performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in its German guise "Don Juan." After the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire, it was taken over by the new, small, impoverished Austrian Republic as one of the best legacies in a sadly mixed inheritance. After all, it had long since belonged not to the Imperial Court but to the Viennese.

Toward the very end of the last war, on March 12, 1945, the Opera House was hit by bombs and gutted, all but the main front, the great staircase, and the foyer. The building burned for two days. For the next ten days, all through the time of the city's struggle for bare existence, opera was played in the old Theater an der Wien, where *Fidelio* had its premiere. Eventually, however, the Government decided to rebuild the Opera House, with Marshall Plan assistance and the help of a levy borne by the population. Rarely has a measure which put a financial burden on the people met with so ready a response. The building was externally reconstructed on its former pattern,

On May 26, 1969, Josef Krips conducted a performance in the Vienna Opera of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* with which the theater was opened a hundred years before. Ilsa Barea is the author of *Vienna*, an authoritative text on the great Danubian city, published in 1966 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

down to every decorative detail. To a Viennese this seemed—unless he or she were a convinced anti-traditionalist—a natural, though not exactly rational, decision. The Opera in its accustomed shape had become a symbol of resurrection, of continuity. It was no contradiction that the interior was simplified in color and line, though discussion raged about the success of the change. On November 5, 1955, the Opera was reopened—with *Fidelio*.

Many of the privileged 2,000-odd who attended the festive reopening still speak with a kind of awed emotion of the vast crowd standing outside the Opera, excluded from the festival and yet sharing in it. I have talked, too, with some of those who stood outside. What they expressed, on looking back, was pride mixed with self-mockery. They had helped to pay for the whole to-do, hadn't they? And even if they couldn't get in then, and couldn't afford a ticket to the place more than once a year now, it was still their Opera as well.

The outline of the Opera House story hints at the affection in which the building is held by the Viennese. It cannot, however, prove anything about the importance operatic music has for them. Has it any genuine importance still, outside a qualified minority? The usual clichés about Vienna are not helpful. What does it mean if the highly influential music editor of a daily paper writes that beyond any doubt the State Opera is "the heart" of Vienna? He comes nearer to reality when he says (and here I agree with him) that "a Viennese loves his Opera even if he never, or hardly ever, sets foot in it." This collective love for a stately public building, and by implication for the art it serves, is an odd fact. It is doubtful whether it has much to do with esthetic appreciation and with music. It has far more to do with a popular tradition that goes back over three centuries and has created a stereotyped attitude. But even stereotyped attitudes can be meaningful.

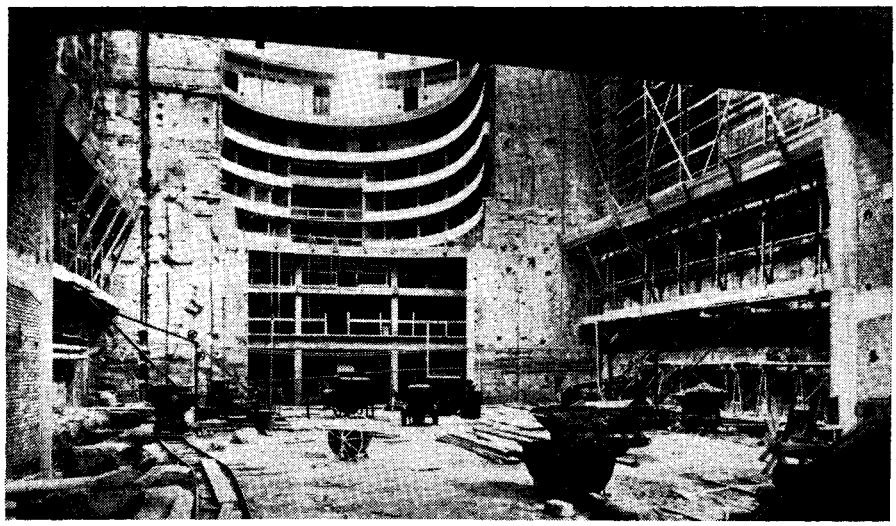
It all started with an emperor's toy. In 1659, Leopold I set up next to his castle a temporary building in which to stage operas in the Venetian style for his own greater glory. The sumptuous performances for the Court became public shows as well. It was in this period—in the wake of the Thirty Years War, at the peak of Austria's forcible re-Catholicization, and in between outbreaks of the plague—that the citizens of Vienna were particularly susceptible to the symbols of Virtue and Power, Misfortune and Redemption clothed in harmony on an unreal baroque stage. Even a skeptical historian has to believe, on the strength of contemporary witnesses, that the houses and lanes of the old walled city overflowed with music. Broadly, the musicality of the Viennese people was rooted in folk song and church music —melody and polyphony. Meanwhile, the popular theater gave them a taste for fairy-tale plots and characters, for blatant fiction and illusion. All of it conditioned them for an understanding of the operatic conventions then emerging.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the more affluent Viennese had access to two court theaters where they could see drama, ballet, and opera, Italian or French troupes, and, soon, the first German light operas. A social split began to show: High society preferred the Italian style and Italian librettos, the new middle classes preferred German texts and German singers, although topped by Italian stars. The constant crises of opera management and the disputes about opera policy roused the fervid interest of a public not identical with music lovers. (This has remained unchanged to this day.) The first of Gluck's revolutionary ballets and operas was staged in one of the Court theaters, and so too, half a generation later, was Mozart's *Seraglio*, with the German libretto Emperor Joseph II had called for. In short, a growing Viennese public, including the social elite, learned to listen to and appraise operas of every style and tradition, even before the great century of opera, the nineteenth, had begun.

Two events in the early part of the last century did more than any others to create in the Viennese that feeling of proud ownership in "their" Opera House, which survives as an apparent anachronism in our changed and changing world. The first was the exclusive dedication of the larger Court theater to opera performances; it was the Theater an der Kärntnertor ("Theater next to the Carinthian Gate"), on the site at the back of the present State Opera which the famous Hotel Sacher now occupies. Until then the greatest, and most experimental, premieres had belonged to suburban private theaters, above all those of *The Magic Flute* and *Fidelio*.

As soon as opera was given its official home and temple, it shaped its ensemble of singers, its orchestra, its permanent conductors, and an audience of subscribers who considered themselves the arbiters of artists, programs, and directors. During Metternich's authoritarian regime, until 1848, even opera librettos were subjected to a stringent censorship, but press criticism of the Opera's management was left comparatively free, although the highest Court officials were responsible for it. It was taken for granted that the Court Exchequer covered the customary deficit. The money came out of taxes, but this was accepted—as it is now, when a Republican administration foots the bill, a large bill. Thus, it is a tradition of more than a hundred years' standing that the Vienna Opera is maintained and financed by the State on behalf of the city and the nation. On the other hand, and this too is relevant, the population has come to feel that it has a stake in it, a right to criticize, to be informed by the press, and to reject or applaud every change in personnel and in administrative policy.

The second event of lasting importance that occurred in the Metternich era was the formation of the Philharmonic Orchestra. The members of the Opera's orchestra, professional musicians at a time when talented amateurs dominated the concerts, started to give "Philharmonic Concerts" mainly de-



"Hit by bombs and gutted, all but the main front, the great staircase, and the foyer." View from the substage as restoration was in progress.

voted to symphonies. They set a new standard, and the craftsmanship they refined in the rehearsals for concert performances was carried back into the orchestra pit at the Opera. In their capacity of "Philharmonics" they were free to follow their artistic conscience, because they were secure in their existence as members of the permanent staff of the Opera. This combination of freedom and security gave them an envied independence as musicians. The constitution of their orchestral society was, and is, democratic: they elect their conductor, who may, or may not, be the same as their conductor-director at the Opera House. Countless anecdotes exist about conflicts between the Philharmoniker and famous composers, conductors, and directors—about their reluctance to play works in a new musical idiom, about the conservatism they share with the Viennese public. Still, for three prior generations it used to be the ambition of Viennese parents — provided they could afford it — to have a member of the Philharmoniker as teacher for their offspring. It is highly probable that there radiated from these teachers a love for opera, an ambition to understand Beethoven and Brahms, and, not least, an addiction to chamber music and, in particular, strings.

Little of all this may be left, except an inherited climate and a deep-seated conviction that, however international conditions and financial competition may have lowered the prestige of the Opera, the Philharmonic Orchestra at its best is still matchless. It still makes headlines even in the popular press, as much as The Opera itself, and carries the name of Vienna world-wide on its frequent tours.

When the Court Opera house near the Carinthian Gate became too small and old-fashioned, at the height of the building boom that created the new Vienna of a new prosperous middle class, the first great public building erected where the ramparts of the old city had been razed was the new Opera House in a romanticized Renaissance style. Not the university, not Parliament, not the museums, not a new wing to the Imperial castle, not the stock exchange, but the Opera took pride of place on the great boulevard that girdles the inner city, the Ringstrasse. It would be too easy to take this for a sign of Vienna's deep dedication to music. Rather, the decision of the city's officials conformed to the view (held by the educated classes) of Vienna as "the capital of music." It was a collective status symbol. All the same, it had its significance. It showed the accepted priorities, and it showed the hold of the inherited tradition. Also, it

"The interior was simplified in color and line." Audience at the reopening performance of "Fidelio" on November 5, 1955.

marked the beginning of another period in opera staging.

For nearly two decades, until the advent of Gustav Mahler as conductor-director in 1897, the productions mirrored the taste of the Viennese Establishment, not only in the choice of operas—Verdi, Wagner, Massenet, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci, Carmen* (a triumph in Vienna after a slow start in Paris), and, by way of contrast, the invasion of the Court Opera by *Die Fledermaus*—but also in the stage décor. It was—in the style of the huge historical canvases then popular—sumptuous, rich, and as glittering as the interior decoration of the house, all red and gold. Only the frescoes in the foyer, and the curtain, were left to speak of earlier, more romantic or more classical layers of taste. In all, the garish vitality of the times found a clarified expression in the productions; to be at an opera premiere had increasing snob value. Still, of its kind and period, the Vienna Court Opera *could* claim to be the foremost in Europe, which flattered the vanity of the great Viennese public and increased its interest in things operatic. Before the solid prosperity was undermined by the restlessness of the turn of the century, the arts had long reflected the change, in painting, in literature, in music outside Vienna and inside. The Court Opera with its marvelous voices and orchestra was left behind—still much to the general taste, though—as a monument among the monumental buildings along the Ring boulevard. It was vivified by Gustav Mahler, who wrought a revolution in production and musicianship by bringing not only his highly personal, sensitive, and exacting insight to the music of other composers, but also the new feeling for light and color that had come with the Expressionist painters. Those who heard him conduct and saw the stage devised by his collaborator Alfred Roller told the next generation —my own—of the way in which Mahler dissolved the dense masses of sound and shape, making them transparent and vibrant. Perhaps for the last time, the Vienna Opera housed an ensemble inspired by the vision of a musical leader who was able to concentrate in many performances the intense, unquiet sense of contemporary life. Enough filtered through to the mass of Viennese (interested in the Opera without being regular operagoers) to give them an idea of this exciting creative center and to touch their own humdrum existence.

Gustav Mahler left the Vienna Opera in 1907. Nothing since, not the era of Richard Strauss as director, or that of Herbert von Karajan with all its storms and spots of international glamour, has come near that image of artistic wholeness. The State Opera has turned into a precious and costly heirloom. The prosperous, cultured upper-middle class of the decades before the First World War has gone; tourist trade considerations are occupying the foreground. And yet, there is still a special feeling for the Opera in Vienna. Every month, the cultural department of the powerful Trade Union Confederation buys for its members half the tickets of one or two performances at the Opera, and could sell far more if prices had not risen to heights unmanageable for average wage-earners. Verdi and Mozart are preferred by them.

I attempted a quiet Gallup Poll recently among my nonintellectual acquaintances. Some said they never went to the Opera, because it "wasn't the place where they felt at home," while others thought prices should come down; however, none resented the taxpayers' money invested in the institution. All said it should be maintained, because Vienna wouldn't be Vienna without The Opera.

ELLINGTON AT THE WHITE HOUSE

—*The Washington Post.*

"In the royalty of American music, no man swings more or stands higher than the Duke."

By STANLEY DANCE

In the two weeks before the much-publicized White House dinner at which President Richard M. Nixon presented him with the Medal of Freedom in observation of his seventieth birthday, Duke Ellington's normally exacting routine had the additional urgencies of satisfying the national and foreign press, radio, and TV. He gave the considerable time they required with varying degrees of cheerfulness and patience, in varying attire, in varying situations, and in varying positions. Some of the more self-important reporters could not believe that an interview could take place with their subject lying on his back in bed, facing the headboard, his feet high on the wall in front of him. Whatever the effect on the circulation, the reversed posture seemed to have a stimulating effect on the conversation.

Special TV and radio programs were also made for European networks. The BBC filmed him at the piano in the trophy room of his New York offices, where the walls are lined with cups, plaques, awards, and significant memorabilia. The Danish Broadcasting Corporation caught him at work in National's big new record studio, where he was trying out vehicles for his new singer, Shirley Witherspoon.

In between these activities, and desperate attempts to keep dentists' appointments ("It's the root-and-canal man's turn today!"), he repeatedly turned to his piano and a major concern, the music for a provocative film called *Change of Mind*. In hotel suites, there would always be an electric piano capable of soft-toned utterance during the night. "You have to write it down when it comes to you," he said. "You can remember the notes the next day, but not the values and rhythm." The music was no sooner written, and the parts of the score copied, than it had to be heard, and where better than in the record studio again? This, in fact, has been his practice for many years: to record new music, to take home a reference tape for consideration, and to revise the next day if necessary.

In this case, an unusual band was gathered together, for his regular group was supposedly enjoying a lay-off, and several of its members were far from New York. The backbone remained, however, and it was satisfactorily reinforced with veterans from the Count Basie and Earl Hines bands. "Are you sober?" he asked with mock fierceness as one wayward musician entered the studio a little late. "I understand you were all 'tore up' yesterday." The music included several items originally recorded in the Thirties. "Wanderlust" was a down blues for the "visit to Soulville." "Creole Rhapsody," revered by the more scholarly Ellington followers as his first "extended" work, was incidentally updated by the sound of the Fender piano that Ellington chose to play it on. "Keep it soft and round-toned," he reminded the four-piece brass section, which, with its foreign elements, was showing some divergence of opinion on tonal values. For the nightclub scene there was "What Good Am I Without You?" and this occasioned another gentle directive: "This is a love song, boys, played with heart." For the opening hospital sequence in an operating theater, there was original dissonant writing that required accuracy to be effective; so after tentative attempts at an "ensemble" statement, each man was required to play his part separately, paying particular attention to time. When they all played together again, the music was immediately satisfactory, and the leader indicated appreciation by finishing the session with a kind of *feu de joie*, an up-tempo piano solo accompanied only by bass and drums.

The transitions he makes and the pace he maintains in music have their counterparts in his social life. Seeing him—on the steps of his Washington hotel, on time for his appointment with the President, but concerned about transportation for his party—was to be reminded of his evenness of temper and of the nearest comparable occasion, when he was presented to Queen Elizabeth II at the Leeds Festival in 1958.

At the White House, Duke and his sister Ruth were received by President and Mrs. Nixon on the second floor, where the President showed his guests the private quarters and demonstrated the stereo equipment. Meanwhile, the dinner guests were gathering in the Cross Hall as the Marine Band played. Among them were Ellington's son, Mercer, his daughter-in-law, his two grandchildren, and a nephew who had flown in from London that day. There, too, were three of the people on whom he most relies: Dr. Arthur Logan, his physician; Harry Carney, who has been a member of his band for more than