

Music to My Ears

Irving Kolodin

A Week of Song as Well as Singers

THE LAST time Gérard Souzay was listed to sing in Philharmonic Hall, he didn't. That was the occasion of a New York Philharmonic performance of Berlioz's *Damnation de Faust* when, between one night's effort and the next day's repetition, he decided he couldn't. But there is a new atmosphere in Philharmonic Hall, and there was a fresh effort within it recently by Souzay to wipe out any prior memories.

This was, in fact, a model of what a recital can be and seldom is: an application of effort in which everything flowed in the same direction of communication from composer to listener, with the performer as intermediary. Artfully varied as it was to include matter as separated in distance as the Greek Islands and the American South, it nevertheless had one ironclad element of unity. That was Souzay's innate awareness of strengths and limitations. It directed him almost unerringly

to what he could do well, and away from what he should not do at all.

His voice, of course, has never been his greatest asset; but now, after a decade and a half of prominence, it is as good as it ever was, and in some respects better. The former condition relates to care in its use, the latter to a determined avoidance of abuse. Thus, as a fine instrument should, it has grown more responsive with age, the more so since Souzay plays upon it with a master's discrimination. Whether it was the artful elaborations by Ravel of *Cinq mélodies populaires grecques*, or Poulenc's affecting *Chansons villageoises*, or a skillfully selected assortment of Fauré ("Claire de lune," "Madrigal," "Le parfum impérisable," or "Toujours"), Souzay and his indispensable associate at the piano, Dalton Baldwin, had everything plotted to a rare coincidence of control and spontaneity. There was, in between, a Schubert group of such tasteful rarities as "Bei dir allein," "Meeres Stille," and "Der Schiffer" that had equal con-

trol if less spontaneity. They were followed by the program's one outright miscalculation, a version of "Der Doppelgänger," which is really beyond his vocal capacity (in the purely quantitative sense). But it led to an "extra" that turned out to be Berlioz's "L'Absence" (from *Nuits d'été*), something few male singers would attempt and no singer, of whatever gender, could surpass. Here was the finesse of all fineses, an encore ending with a *pianissimo* that kept those who could appreciate it marveling silently through the intermission.

This would have been enough to characterize the evening as a success, but what made it the model alluded to earlier was the subsequent digression to new material by Ned Rorem and Thomas J. Flanagan. The latter's three settings of texts by John Clare could be accounted for by the circumstance that the Souzay recital was one in a series sponsored by St. John's University (to celebrate its centennial year) and Flanagan is a member of its faculty. This need be no implication of the kind of family connection that brings on artistic nepotism, for this Flanagan's compositional capabilities (not to be confused with those of the late William Flanagan) are solid and aptly employed in a vocal context. The settings tended to be a little conventional in method, but skillfully directed to the ends for which the composer elected these texts.

In his own quietly distinctive way, Rorem has trumped all the recent music of protest (and many of the written words, too) in his bitterly eloquent treatment of four selections from Whitman's *Specimen Days* to which he has given the title of *War Scenes*, and for which he has named as dedicatees "those who died in Vietnam, both sides, during the time of composition, June 20-30, 1969." There is the implication of journalism, or, at least, opportunism, in the context thus established; but Rorem has vindicated his option by the artistry he has brought to its fulfillment. As often a kind of declamation as it is a musicalization of the texts—the dying and the dead, the wounded and the maimed are its sad cast of characters—Rorem's results nevertheless become *compositions* through the constant interplay of intervallic values, the rise and fall of the prosody, the illuminating interjections of a shaft of pianistic color here, a muffled throb of silence there. It is a sizable accomplishment for Rorem, and he deserved not only the obeisance tendered by Souzay, but every bit of the applause that the performers directed toward him.

Brave man that he is, Souzay sang both the Flanagan and the Rorem sequences in the language of the poets as

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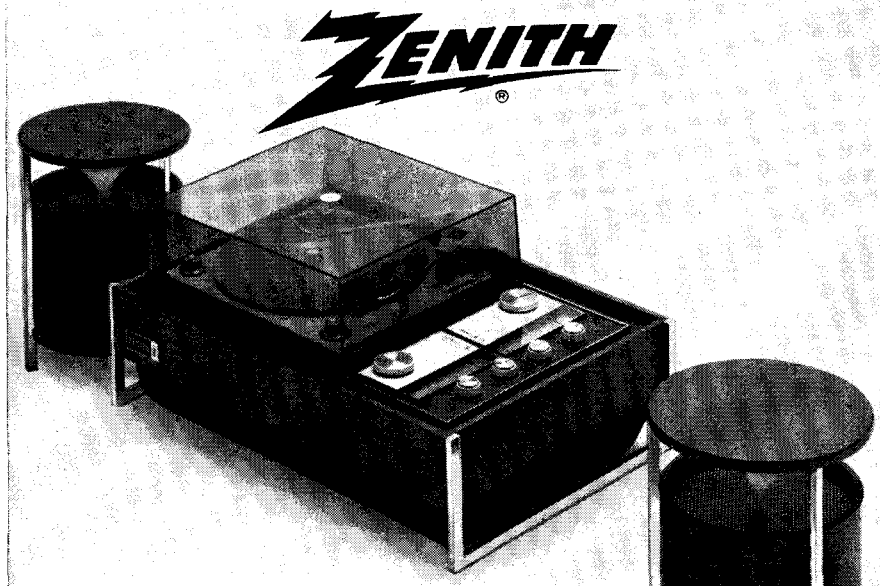
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well as the composers, which is to say English. Accomplished linguist though he is, this posed some difficulties of comprehension at the outset, for the best French-English is never quite the same as the best English-English. But, after a while, it really didn't matter too much, for Souzay's capacity to involve the audience with whatever he does enabled him to cast a much wider net of attention than might have been available to a performer with impeccable enunciation. And there were the texts in the program to rely upon (save when they offered a confusingly musical reference to "distant canon" in Whitman's description of "A Night Battle").

The debut program of Korean tenor Philip Cho in Alice Tully Hall was similarly segmented. It began and ended with repertory matter, surrounding a section in between that was devoted to the first public hearing of material from Virgil Thomson's opera-in-progress, *Lord Byron*. Among the factors immediately to Cho's credit were a light, fresh, agreeable tenor sound, a well-schooled manner of using it, and considerable indications of artistic instincts, even temperament. He was clearly inside the sentiments of Beethoven's "Adelaide" and Schubert's "Nacht und Träume" as well as "Die Forelle," if not quite abreast of the darker mood of "Die böse Farbe." Something approaching real ardor made itself apparent in Strauss's "Die Nacht," and he had the mood of "Ständchen" well in mind, if, as yet, not all the technic needed to trace the vocal involutions under concert conditions.

The three excerpts from *Lord Byron* (beginning "Alas! The Love of Woman," "The Wanderer from the British World of Fashion," and "Sweet Lady, Once My Heart Was Warm") had a mixture of expectable and unexpected elements. In the former category was Thomson's discriminating treatment of the more than ordinarily literate texts by Jack Larsen; in the latter, a musical idiom whose "Englishness" suggested some conscious reference to the vernacular of the early nineteenth-century British period. Interest really transcended performance values, for a wholly successful performance required both a more experienced and a stronger-voiced singer than Cho. Also, as his own pianist, Thomson represented the composer like a composer—with more feeling than technique. In other portions of the program Cho profited by expert pianistic assistance from Allen Rogers.



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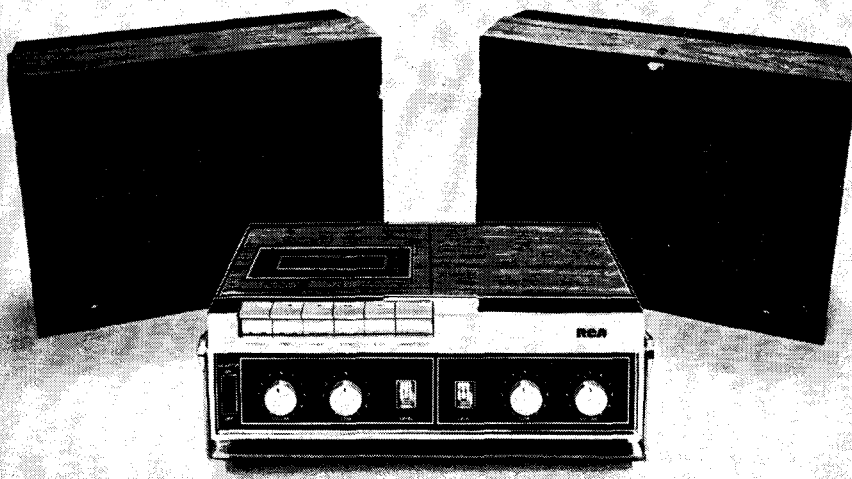
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The Theater

Henry Hewes

The New Ford's

WASHINGTON, D.C.

THIS IS A GOOD theater town. Its National Theatre is a popular spot for shows on their way to or coming from Broadway. Arena Stage is one of the oldest and best resident professional theater operations in the country (*The Great White Hope* and *Indians* are essentially Arena Stage productions transferred to Broadway). The Washington Theater Club, with its persistent policy of giving priority to new untested scripts won this year's Margo Jones Award. And now, at historic, recently renovated Ford's Theatre, Washington will have a series of interesting revivals produced by New York's Circle in the Square. Since Circle in the Square has an unmatched record for producing long-running revivals at its 299-seat Off-Broadway playhouse (*Little Murders*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Eh?*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Trojan Women*, *The White Devil*, plus *The Iceman Cometh* and *Summer and Smoke* at its previous theater), it would seem reasonable to expect that it could bring the same high quality and success to Ford's Theatre, which although it has twice as many seats to fill each night requires runs only one-sixth as long as Circle in the Square's New York average.

This season's opening play at Ford's is a happy choice. Director Ted Mann, whose career has included several O'Neill revivals, is on secure ground with the playwright, and *Ah, Wilderness!*, which over the years has been the most steadily performed of all O'Neill's works, is a sure-fire audience-pleasing comedy. It is a portrait of 1906 American family normalcy, spiced with just enough aberration to make it credible. Its characters have impulses that could lead to profound experiences, but "healthy" family ties always pull them back into a cozier comic existence.

Happily, Mr. Mann has assembled a solid cast for his tenderly amusing production. Larry Gates is splendidly dry in the role of the father, and his embarrassed double-talk sex lecture to his son is a hilarious gem. Stefan Gierasch is equally unsentimental as the alcoholic Uncle Sid; his entrance where he glides unsteadily past the door he had intended to enter, only to come through a second door instead, is an inspired piece of comic business.

Geraldine Fitzgerald catches the comic incongruity of a mother who in one breath insists that her husband punish their son, and in the next is concerned because the boy is suffering. Tony Schwab plays the sixteen-year-old son with a touch of today's long-haired rebelliousness that gives the play a little modern relevance to go with its nostalgic quaintness. And Peggy Pope adds an amusing bit as the floozy who is perplexed by the difficulties of trying to corrupt a minor.

Marsha Eck's settings beautifully capture the feel of the period, and they turn the unworkable forestage of Ford's Theatre into a box set so that the action does not become remote. Leigh Rand's costumes exaggerate ever so slightly the old fashions to emphasize the comic nature of a play that could easily become too sentimental. And the Ford's Theatre Society has enhanced the whole experience by putting cushions on the playhouse's hard chairs. Extremism in the maintenance of historical verisimilitude may be a sore point with some. But with the advance of democracy, today's theatergoers now have the right to be as comfortable in their seats as were those privileged personages who used to sit in the boxes of Ford's Theatre.

At Arena Stage, director Zelda Fichandler is currently attempting an ambitious new play by Arthur Giron called *Edith Stein*. Although it is based upon the life of a German Jew's conversion to Roman Catholicism and her persecution by the Nazis, its most interesting aspect is a love-hate relationship between an obsessed storm trooper and the nun he must eventually exterminate at Auschwitz. The play suggests that both Miss Stein and her persecutor shared a violent fanaticism that needed to be tempered into a compassionate love. This is valid, and a cast headed by Marketa Kimbrell, James Luisi, Anne Meacham, and Anne Ives gives the play's parade of short scenes an earnest performance. However, one feels that our glimpses of Edith Stein's theological metamorphosis are unsatisfyingly nominal and abrupt.

Back in New York, Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre followed its acclaimed opening presentation of *The Constant Prince* [SR, Nov. 1] with its very contemporary version of Stanislaw Wyspianski's turn-of-the-century play, *Acropolis*. For it, the Washington Square Methodist Church auditorium