

A Berlioz "Troyens" for the Record

by THOMAS HEINITZ

THE TWIN CLIMAX of Britain's tribute to the memory of Hector Berlioz in this centenary year of his death took the form of two closely linked events whose unprecedentedness brings to a close more than a century of the most shameful, senseless neglect ever accorded a great and noble masterpiece. Covent Garden did produce "The Trojans" substantially complete, in English, in 1957 (the production being subsequently revived in 1958 and 1960), and many of us have never forgotten how much we owe to Rafael Kubelik for the kind of musical revelation that adds a totally new dimension to one's artistic appreciation. Yet this year's new production, which received eight performances (all of them sold out) spread over some three weeks, presented *Les Troyens* absolutely complete and in the original French for the first time since Berlioz completed his greatest score on May 9, 1858. I doubt whether the enormity of this fact can be fully appreciated by anyone who has never experienced the work in the theater (and I mean the whole work, not some butchered version, insensitively performed, such as has been seen from time to time in Paris, Milan, and other centers). I can think of no parallel case where the supreme masterpiece of an otherwise famous and far from unpopular composer has remained hidden from view.

In a way, I viewed the approach of the first night, September 17, with a certain trepidation, for passionate love affairs, even with works of art, have a habit of cooling off over a lengthy period as the first flush of enthusiasm gives way to a more detached and critical appraisal. In the case of *Les Troyens*, of course, the decade of the Sixties had not been entirely barren, for, thanks to the missionary zeal of that arch-Berliozian Colin Davis, a series of concert performances kept our interest alive. It had long been accepted that, when Covent Garden finally decided to mount the opera once more, Davis would have to be the conductor. Though, for a variety of reasons, the new production was not the unqualified success one had hoped for, the work itself was not merely vindicated—its beauty, splendor, passion, and dramatic power surpassed all our memories.

Our gratitude to Covent Garden must not blind us to the fact that the

production itself revealed a serious misunderstanding of the work's nature: Though it contains spectacular scenes, *Les Troyens* is not fundamentally a spectacular opera, and to treat it as such, with costumes and scenery of the utmost lavishness and a stage filled with milling choristers and dancers, is no substitute for an imaginative response to Berlioz's noble conception. Colin Davis possesses an unequaled feeling for the music in all its classical grandeur and romantic intimacy, and, when he succeeds Georg Solti as the Royal Opera's musical director, he will surely revive the present production in a drastically simplified form. On this occasion he obviously had to do the best he could under trying circumstances, and, on the first night, at any rate, he was hard pressed to keep his forces together in the face of a good deal of scenic chaos.

Further disaster threatened when, shortly before the third performance, Josephine Veasey fell ill. But the groans that greeted the announcement (from the stage) of her indisposition turned to applause at the news that her place would be taken by Janet Baker. It is doubtful whether Covent Garden has ever witnessed a nobler rescue operation than Miss Baker's thrilling Dido, though she had to sing the part in English; in fact, she sang two performances, and, while her voice does not fill the theater as amply as Miss Veasey's more dramatic mezzo, she brought to the role such a wealth of nuance and such unsuspected reserves of passion that she scored a great personal triumph.

When "The Trojans" was first heard at Covent Garden in 1957, the vocal sensation of those performances was Jon Vickers's Aeneas. Though not in his best voice on the opening night, his Enée remains one of the most satisfying and, indeed, thrilling operatic assumptions of our day, blending stunning, heroic muscularity with tender lyricism, superb musicianship, and complete dramatic plausibility. The Cassandra, Anja Silja, looked magnificent and gave a gripping portrayal of

a demented prophetess, but her powerful singing was often unlovely, and, in the final scene of Act II, one was conscious of her weak lower register. Her Choroebus, Peter Glossop, used his splendid Verdian baritone to fine effect, but his acting looked conventional and placid beside Silja's; Anne Howells, *en travesti*, was an altogether charming Ascanius, but Heather Begg's Anna was no more than adequate.

Smaller parts were handled with varying degrees of competence; the chorus sang firmly whenever producer Minos Volonakis allowed them an adequate view of the conductor; and the orchestra not only played with notable skill but faithfully reflected Colin Davis's passionate belief in the work, as well as his singular flair for Berliozian melodic lines and textures.

The new Philips recording, completed at 10:15 p.m. on October 19 after occupying Walthamstow Town Hall for a total of seventeen three-hour sessions involving approximately 365 takes, can hardly fail to speed this process. Not only will it be the first complete recording of the opera, but previous sets devoted to the work have been so woefully inadequate and wanting in sensitivity as to do the work a real disservice. Having spent some eighteen hours at Philips's sessions, I am confident that the five-disc album due to be released early in 1970 will, whatever its minor defects, prove nothing less than a revelation to music-lovers on every continent unfamiliar with *Les Troyens*. The collaboration between conductor Colin Davis, producer Erik Smith, and musical adviser David Cairns has been a real labor of love, and the Covent Garden cast was notably strengthened by the splendid young Swedish soprano Berit Lindholm (Cassandra) and that fine French bass Roger Soyer (doubling the roles of Narbal and Hector's Ghost). Jon Vickers was in stunning voice whenever I heard him, and Josephine Veasey, once she had recovered from her indisposition, sang beautifully as Dido.

The very last session was mainly devoted to the sublime "Love Duet," and I can honestly say that I have never heard this intoxicatingly beautiful music sound so lovely as on this occasion. I almost envy those who will hear *Les Troyens* for the first time when this recording is released, but it is only in the theater that the work as a whole can be properly appreciated, and, if the Philips recording is instrumental in hastening the end of the most ignominious neglect ever suffered by a major musical masterpiece, as it surely will, it shall have served a noble and historic purpose.



If It Pleases

by OLIVER DANIEL

Back in 1896 when Tolstoi wrote his *What Is Art?* he assembled definitions of art—including all its manifestations—by the major estheticians and philosophers ranging from the early eighteenth century through his time. He then proceeded to augment these with a lengthy chapter embodying his own concepts. It makes fascinating reading, but leaves one hanging when it comes to assessing our most recent products. One definition Tolstoi meditated on was by Immanuel Kant, who suggested that "beauty in its subjective meaning is that which, in general and necessarily, without reasonings and without practical advantage, pleases." Schiller, a follower of Kant, referred to art as a game. And here we find some reconciliation with what has gone before and what is happening now. With his game theory, Schiller would have understood both Yannis Xenakis and Charles Wuorinén better than many of their older contemporaries. New works—electronic, instrumental, and even computerized—are coming on in a marvelous profusion of gamesmanship.

Xenakis, who is regarded as a kind of mechanical genius, has turned his mind toward music-making, and the result, far from being an exercise in drier mathematics, becomes an exciting musical experience. It even does what Kant has suggested beauty in art must do: it pleases. Two albums released by Angel (S-36655 and S-36636, \$5.98) give considerable time and space to Xenakis. The second disc in this series is all his and includes four works. Side 1 opens with *Polla Ta Dhina*, a work for chorus and orchestra written in 1962. The vocal part is taken from Sophocles' *Antigone*, titled here "Hymn to Man." While to most observers Carl Orff would be considered at an opposite end of the musical spectrum, the simple monodic choral treatment is Orffian in execution, but the accompanying sounds are not. But that is Xenakis's marvelously inventive prerogative.

It is in the second work that we come into the fun and games department. The piece is, believe it or not, labeled *ST/10=1-080262 for Ten Instruments* (1956-1962). One cannot simplify Xenakis, and so I quote from the record liner:

The composition signifies the initial calculation by the IBM 7090 . . . following a special stochastic (probabilist) program devised by Xenakis. To the composer, the calculation of probabilities in itself is based upon the only theory capable of dealing with great numbers . . . Basically, the program is a complex of stochastic laws by which the composer orders the electronic brain to define all the sounds one after the other in a previously calculated sequence. First comes the occurrence date, then the tonal class (*arco*, *pizzicato*, *glissando*, etc.), the instrument, the height, the *glissando* pitch if there is any, the length in time, and the dynamic form of the emission of sound. In the title itself, ST stands for stochastic (from the Greek word *stochos*, meaning "aim") and is a term Xenakis frequently applies to his music. (In mathematical terms, stochastic has reference to the contingency of change or the theory of probability first introduced by Jacques Bernoulli in 1713.) 10=1 signifies that this is Xenakis's first work for ten instruments. 080262 equals February 8, 1962, the date when the work was calculated by the 7090. As Xenakis has commented, the IBM 7090 has served his music well by advancing his goal of creating . . . "a form of composition which is not the object in itself, that is to say, the beginnings of a family of compositions."

Curiously, the end result is no gimmicky devitalization. It makes sense, a kind of musical sense that is indeed a bit frightening. Computer people talk of "garbage in, garbage out." Xenakis puts music in.

Akrata for sixteen wind instruments is also based on complex manipulation



Wuorinén—"as . . . calculated as a project in rocketry."



—Photos, Nonesuch Records.

Subotnick — "content to give his music a beat. . ."

of mathematical ideas based "on the theory of transformation groups. It makes use of the theory which annexes 'modulor' congruences, and is derived from an axiomatic of the universal structure of music." It sounds quite like a mindless electronic improvisation, all of which convinces me that one cannot reverse the process and, on hearing this music, perceive anything comparable to the theoretical involvement from which it is generated.

The fourth work is *Achorripsis for 21 Instruments*. It refers to a "Jet of Sound" and was "composed with Poisson's Law of Probabilities and developed with the help of a matrix of this compositional behavior which is stochastic in nature." In computerese this is "garbage out."

The other disc of this series groups Xenakis with Betsy Jolas and André Boucourechliev. Xenakis's piece is a brilliant work for solo piano that is as spastic and unbeguling as anything I've encountered for a long time, and hardly warrants the pianistic wizardry that George Pludemacher lavishes on it.

Betsy Jolas's *Quatuor II* calls for a soprano along with a string trio to form her quartet. The individual flavor of this piece stems from the vocal pyrotechnics of Mady Mesplé. She is quite remarkable and sings with an agility that is unstrained. As music, the work is ordinary despite its pretensions.

Boucourechliev's *Archipel I* is a chance piece for two pianists and two percussion players using fifty-four different instruments, and the performers are more or less on their own. Although I have not seen the actual scores, they are described as being similar to "large nautical maps on which the four interpreters must

(Continued on page 84)