

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 unbeguing 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

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Recordings in Review

Four-Star "Werther"

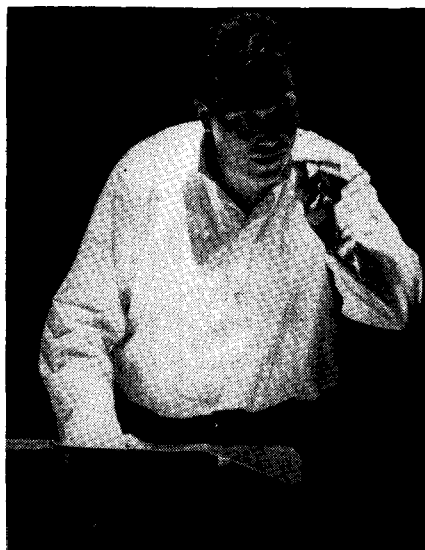
MASSENET: *Werther*. Victoria de los Angeles, Nicolai Gedda, Mady Mesplé, Roger Soyer, Jean-Christophe Benoit, Christos Grigoriou, and André Malabrera; with Georges Prêtre conducting the Orchestre de Paris. Angel stereo, SCL 3736, \$17.98.

PRESENT-DAY operagoers will be disinclined to believe it, but there was a time when the composer with the largest number of operas performed in New York was neither Wagner nor Verdi, but Jules Massenet, with fourteen. Does his eclipse argue a change of taste or a lack of opportunity for taste to assert itself? Possibly some of both, but, most of all, the decline in availability of performers with the qualifications to encourage more than an occasional *Manon*.

Here, then, is a triumphant demonstration of what happens when an all-out effort is mounted to give one of his less frequently performed works its opportunity to court public favor. Angel's supervisors deserve at least a Croix de Guerre with battle stars (the Grand Prix du Disque was probably delivered even before the recording was finished) for giving the phonophile what has never existed before: a four-star *Werther* (comparatively, the Cœtra Tagliavini-Tassinari version was in the utility class). Central star is, of course, Massenet himself; the constellation that surrounds him is made up not only of such stars as Victoria de los Angeles, Nicolai Gedda, and Georges Prêtre, but of such satellites as Mady Mesplé and Roger Soyer. All the other roles are similarly well served.

As in the case of *Thaïs*, *Hérodiade*, and *Don Quichotte*, it is an important first step for the listener to remember that *Werther* is not about the historical figures of Goethe's novel at all. It is about some figures in Massenet's fantasy named Charlotte and Werther with whom he has the kind of associative affection that he also had for those others in history to whom his heart went out. As a summation of the agonies of unrequited love immortalized in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, this opera is no more satisfying on behalf of Goethe than Gounod's *Faust*. But as a pleasant way to pass an evening with characters who are more tragical than tragic, there is much to be said for it.

That is especially true after the first, somewhat tentative half of Act I has been disposed of, having fulfilled its mood-serving purpose. The opera be-



—Capitol Records.

Georges Prêtre — "back on the artistic terrain of 'la belle France.'"

gins to move with Werther's "O nature, pleine de grâce" (not too well sung by Gedda) and the "Clair de lune" duet, but the issue of interest is really resolved in Act III, in which Charlotte's reading of Werther's letters and the great scene that grows out of his "Pourquoi me réveiller?" are Massenet's operatic artistry at very nearly its best. As the Earl of Harewood says (in his revision of Kobbé's *Complete Opera Book*): "From the beginning of Act III right through to the end of the opera, there is a directness of expression and a decisiveness that contrasts with the frustration, the continual second thoughts of the first two acts."

It is to the great credit of Prêtre, once more back on the artistic terrain of *la belle France* where his talent flourishes best, that he maintains a maximum of possible effect in the first two acts, so that the attention is retained until the time when Massenet achieves the kind of warm, uncompromising sentiment for which his gift was so great. Once past the opening aria, Gedda is a Werther to cherish, as los Angeles is a Charlotte whose confusion and contrition are never conveyed at a cost to beautiful sound. Unexpectedly excellent as Sophie is the effort of Mesplé, who marks her talents for future attention by the affecting delivery of the two little arias in which Massenet returns to the youthful enchantment of *Manon*. In all, *Werther* marks a red-letter day for those to whom French opera is not *mort*, merely *dormant*, waiting, like that other sleeping beauty, for the kiss of those who can bring it once more to life.

A Loewefest

LOEWE: "Prinz Eugen"; "Trommel-Ständchen"; "Heinrich der Vogler"; "Die drei Lieder"; "Die Uhr"; "Hochzeitlied"; "Elvershöh"; "Der heilige Franziskus"; "Odins Meeresritt"; "Der Nöck"; and "Die Gruft der Liebenden." Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone; with Jörg Demus, piano. DGG stereo, 139 416, \$5.98.

IN HIS seventy-three years, Carl Loewe comprehended much of the history of the lied as it grew from the tentative beginnings of Mozart and Beethoven to the status of an art form all its own. Schubert was his exact contemporary (two months younger, in fact), and when Loewe died in 1869, Hugo Wolf was about to enter a Gymnasium in Graz. Both facts are relevant to the contents of this disc, which range from the Schubertish "Die Uhr" to the sophisticated setting of Goethe's "Hochzeitlied" in a vein of humorous parody developed to a house specialty by Wolf.

As the contents suggest, even in his investigation of the Loewe literature, Fischer-Dieskau has sought out a combination of quality and novelty. Thus "Prinz Eugen" and "Heinrich der Vogler" stand for the bardic side of Loewe (no "Edward" or "Tom der Reimer," however), with "Elvershöh," "Die Gruft der Liebenden," and "Trommel-Ständchen" of such little general knowledge that no listing of them can be found in the first edition of Clough-Cuming (covering the whole period of 78 rpm recording). Fischer-Dieskau is at the peak of his interpretative art in this notable collection.

The Youngest Bjoerling

LEONCAVALLO: "Skratta Pajazzo" (*Pajazzo*). PUCCINI: "Saangen till livet" and "Det Sköna staar att Finna" (*Tosca*); "Laat henne tro" (*Flickan från Vilda Västern*). VERDI: "Ack som ett Fjun saa lätt" (*Rigoletto*) and "Strettan" (*Trubaduren*). MASCAGNI: *Siciliana* (*Cavalleria Rusticana*). TOSELLI: "Serenata." CURTIS: "Carmela." RAY: "Säg mig godnatt." BALL: "Bliv min saa är världen min." PETERSON: "När jag för mig själv i mörka skogen gaar" and "Bland Skogens höga furustammar." WIDE: *Nämner du Sverige*. ANON: "Tanti's Serenad." Jussi Bjoerling, tenor; with Nils Grevillius conducting. Odeon, PMES 551, \$4.79.

THE TITLE listed above may be slightly misleading, for it does not reproduce the voice of the late Jussi Bjoerling when, as a boy, he toured America with a family quartet of which his father was the leader. But it does pick him up at the age of twenty-three in 1930 (he