

# Music to My Ears

Irving Kolodin

## Philharmonic Hall Revised; Boito's "Mefistofele" Revived

SITTING IN the "new" Philharmonic Hall is like taking a trip out of town without crossing the Hudson River. What acoustician Heinrich Keilholz has been aiming for, aurally, has been partially revealed in the successive preceding steps; what he had in mind as a totality can only be assessed now that the visual revisions have been coordinated with the completed structural changes.

In place of the glowering "clouds" now banished, Keilholz has designed a stepped-up ceiling structure, ranging upward from the back of the stage to the top of the last balcony. As well as exerting a sound-dispersing effect, the "steps" provide sources of indirect light (craftily conceived by Abe Feder), air conditioning, and banks of spotlights. Like the walls, they are light in tone against the red of the seats and carpeting. Thus the relationship of eye and ear is complementary.

More to the point, the relationship of the ear to the music produced in the hall is far more uniform, equalized, and satisfying than at any previous time. At the first impact in a rehearsal for the season-opening Pension Fund concert, as Seiji Ozawa directed Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* music, the orchestral sound was richly resonant from bottom to top; at the concert in which Debussy's *La Mer* was heard, with a hall full of listeners, it was somewhat thinned out. At a Thursday night program in which the strings performed the J. C. Bach Symphony in D Major and Alicia de Larrocha was the able soloist in the Schumann Piano Concerto, it seemed to me that the hall gave back exactly what was created on the stage. Not all the answers are in, but a sizable number of questions about Philharmonic Hall have been resolved, now and, one suspects, forever.

The attention aroused by the New York City Opera's production of Boito's *Mefistofele* will not seem to have much justification in Chicago or San Francisco, where the work has been heard at intervals in the last decade. But the last Metropolitan production went into the discard decades ago, and Rudolf Bing's administration has left the honor of exploiting such stalwart performers of its principal roles as the young Renata Tebaldi, the unaging Cesare Siepi, and the always admirable Carlo Bergonzi, to others.

The range of interests revealed in *Mefistofele* by the City Opera's enterprising Julius Rudel—with Norman Treigle at his best as Mefistofele, Robert Nagy striving for a place among leading tenors as Faust, and young Carol Neblett doubling as Margherita and Elena—is considerable. It is high-minded; it is decidedly more in the spirit of the source from which it is derived than the infinitely more popular treatment by Gounod; and it achieves, from time to time a lofty, Goethian level of musical expression. It is an irony, however, that Boito, who later served Verdi so well as librettist for his great *Otello* and *Falstaff*, did not do as well by himself in *Mefistofele*. It is, in essence, a series of scenes in which Mefistofele and Faust conduct their philosophic, psychological warfare in a kind of worldwide travelogue.

Unavoidably, then, the drama is more internal than external, meaning that what happens on stage, whether in the "Kermesse," the "Brocken

Scene," in prison, or in Grece is only symptomatic of the transformations that occur within the person of the central figure of the drama (Faust himself). For an uncommon exception, director Tito Capobianco has been almost abstemious in the amount of action he has put on the stage. According to individual preference, this means that he has permitted a larger latitude for the principals, or left lapses when they are not in evidence.

The second condition prevails, in my view, during the long stretches of the Prologue in which the chorus is restricted to the wings, and there was little to occupy the eye save projections (devised by David Mitchell) of symbolic shapes and colors, perhaps galactic in implication, together with images suggestive of celestial explosions. Much of the musical material in this prologue is infused with a charging, dramatic surge, but it falls short of its ultimate effect through Boito's overuse of repetitions and stepwise sequences. Thus the visual presentation did not give as much support to the music as it required.

What did, in this performance, was unquestionably the vocal command, the physical presence, and the imaginative power that Treigle marshaled for his Mefistofele. Some might re-



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gard it as crafty rather than domineering and mystical rather than dominating, but to those without a preconception of the character's appearance, he gave an illusion of a destiny-haunted devil. Vocally, the famous soliloquies were projected on a large scale and shaped with artistic intelligence. It is always a measure of a dramatic artist's achievement to make the center of attraction wherever he or she happens to be, and Treigle discharged this obligation unflinchingly. What he did not discharge as well was Mefistofele's requirement to whistle down, defiantly, the powers of Good by which he is opposed. These were turned over to shrill-sounding orchestral instruments, amplified through speakers. Not the same, really.

As Faust, Nagy showed a largeness of sound familiar from his Metropolitan career in smaller roles, plus a somewhat leaner line and a more than promising command of legato. To complete his conversion from supporting to leading tenor, Nagy requires a transformation that is more psychological than vocal. Once he had disposed of "Dai campi, dai prati" in the laboratory scene, he moved on with greater confidence and assurance. He also has lost weight and carries himself better than at any previous time. There was nothing but promise in the dual effort of Miss Neblett, and an unanticipated amount of vocal quality in David Clements's appearance as Wagner.

According to his custom, Rudel provided compulsive leadership, sometimes a little strenuous and headstrong for the best interests of the music, but never less than vital. What he served best was Boito's burning conviction in what he was doing, the extent to which he diverged from the prevailing standards in Italian opera of the late 1860s (more toward Berlioz rather than Wagner). The work falters in mid-course, but it shows championship caliber in attaining its best level where it is, in any creative effort, most difficult—at the end. David Mitchell's production had relevant style, but it left the stage somewhat bare at times (in the "Brocken Scene" as well as the Prologue). Robert Joffrey's choreographic ideas were good as far as they went, which was not quite far. The essential fact for New Yorkers, however, is that Boito's *Mefistofele* is being well sung on a stage and that is, automatically, a compulsion to attendance.



## AMSTERDAM: Vulgarity

AMERICA WAS the land of technology and Europe possessed culture: that was the way the Western world had distributed the tasks. And when the American tourists came — naturally with cigars, cameras, and "vulgar-looking" shirts—we rushed to stand on the doorsteps of our old cathedrals and watch pityingly, thinking how little these Americans understood our culture.

We had to swallow hard, though, when they whizzed away in their eight-cylinder limousines, after taking their pictures; but we still had our cathedrals and palaces, even if we had not been inside them for years. Fair is fair: they had money and technology, we had history and culture. The Americans did not want to be spoilsports and they did not argue; in fact, they believed it themselves. Nevertheless, gradually there came to be more Impressionists hanging in New York than in Paris.

Yes, we can say, "that was bought with an overflow of 'hard dollars,' art by force." This does not really say anything about American culture. A little later, they were playing Shakespeare better on Broadway than in London, and many people were coming to watch. But that was Broadway, and it was full of neon lights and movies; that was commerce, not culture . . . though it was beginning to look very much like it.

—A. DE SWAAN,

*America in Termijnen.*

## KARACHI: Arabs Protest over Phantom

THE ARAB ambassadors' joint protest to the U.S. over the delivery of Phantom fighter-bombers to Israel has evoked a reaction that is revealing in more than one respect. The supplier is still sticking to the extraordinary claim that this offensive weapon is required to "ensure Israel's security." This is not even backed by the Israelis themselves. . . . The timing of the Phantoms' delivery could not be more devastating to the peace prospects in the region. This action stands in sharp contrast to the latest French decision against the supply of offensive weapons to Israel.

By giving the finest strike aircraft, the U.S. appears to be encouraging Israeli aggression and the unbridled reign of terror and torture in occupied Arab areas. This is hardly compatible with the consistent public stand taken

by the U.S. spokesmen at the U.N. and other international forums, reiterating its solicitude for peace and peacemaking in the Middle East.

—Dawn.

## TOKYO: Disastrous Failure

THE SECOND MEETING of the Japanese-American Assembly, participated in by eighty politicians, businessmen, scholars, and journalists, ended its four-day session Sunday after adopting its final report. The most noteworthy point of this meeting was that it showed how disastrous failure in Vietnam has been for the United States. One of the important members of the assembly, Edwin O. Reischauer, believed in U.S. policy in Vietnam when he was American ambassador in Japan. This attitude was then common to most Americans. Now that they have had a bitter experience in Vietnam, however, they are obliged to change their posture. The result is that America will turn its political interest and energy to domestic problems and thereby gradually withdraw from Asia. In this way, the U.S. has come to expect a greater Japanese role in Asia. The report runs in part to the effect that the influence of Japan in Southeast Asia will greatly increase in 1970s.

—Mainichi Shimbun.

## LONDON: Divided Advice

TWO POINTS emerge from President Nixon's latest speech at the U.N. First, that he is still unwilling to de-escalate the war in Vietnam to a sufficient degree that would bring about a situation in which there can be meaningful talks. Second, that he is continuing the process of withdrawal from the war which started when President Johnson ceased the bombing of the North. On the surface the two points seem contradictory. However, what is obviously represented by President Nixon's approach is the divided advice he is getting from his military and civilian advisers. Clearly the American military in the field in Vietnam are opposing a rapid rundown in American strength in order to escape from what they believe to be the humiliation of a defeat.

—Tribune.

## PARIS: Nixon vs. LBJ

MR. NIXON'S first move was to change the style of the White House. The Re-