

# Music to My Ears

Irving Kolodin

## Curzon and Szell, Restorers; Tucker, Tebaldi, Sutherland, and Price

AS THERE IS, even in a Beethoven year, no conceivable way in which a program bringing together an overture, concerto, and symphony of his can be construed in terms of novelty, there must have been something else that made such a recent evening in Philharmonic Hall uncommon. One reason, at least, was the presence of George Szell as conductor and Clifford Curzon as piano soloist. Theirs is a partnership that strikes fire, meshes gears, and otherwise communicates a kind of selfless interest in a composer's well-being. It has also become a brand name for the kind of restoring well known in the art world, but not so commonly associated with music.

On paper, the particular sequence Szell arranged meant nothing special or attention-alerting. In the concert hall, however, the beginning with *The Creatures of Prometheus* Overture and the ending with the Seventh Symphony, with the Fourth Concerto in between, was both special and attention-alerting. It was all major Beethoven in tonality (C, G, and A) and, if not unremittingly so in significance, carefully, consistently of greater weight and sonority as the evening progressed.

For all its individuality, the Fourth Concerto of Beethoven might also be described as the last of Mozart. In its intimacy, duality of emphasis, and distribution of prominence between solo instrument and orchestra, it looks backward, perhaps for the last time in concerto writing, to the impulses and considerations that animated the greatest half dozen of Mozart's. Shrewdly and purposefully, Szell prefaced it with the *Prometheus* Overture, one of the earliest works of the kind by Beethoven to endure, and lightly, tightly scored. Its zesty alternation of loud and soft, active and passive elements served ideally to prepare the orchestra for the chamber music participation Szell wanted in the concerto.

The beautifully detailed playing of the orchestral score was among the principal pleasures of the concerto, but it was less important as a factor on its own than as the backdrop on which could be displayed Curzon's musical finesse and his comprehension of the work's character. Also against the backdrop could be discerned some

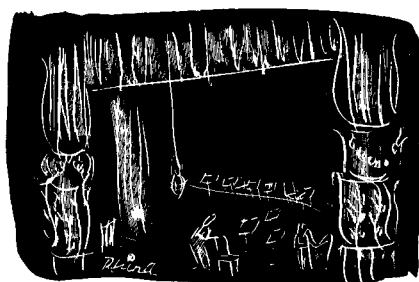
shadowy outlines of the firmly etched design that the late Artur Schnabel, with whom Curzon spent some formative years, repeatedly made of this work.

As interesting as the conformities, in Curzon's playing, to that design were the deviations. What Schnabel did with this work was, very likely, a paragon for Curzon, but it was remodeled, reshaped, and amended to accommodate his own decidedly different temperament. And, of course, his scale of sonorities is more restricted, emphatically less weighty, but also richer in color values, than Schnabel's. What the partners-in-restoration made of the opportunity for dialogue and discussion in the Adagio came to a kind of discourse rarely heard in any performance of it.

Describing a great Beethoven interpreter of another anniversary (1870) in a letter to a friend, Liszt utilized the punning possibilities of German to dub him a "*Kenner*" as well as a "*Könnner*." Translation of these almost identical-sounding words into English being all but impossible, the same order of praise intended by Liszt can be applied to Szell and Curzon as "knowers" and "doers."

The allusion fitted somewhat less snugly Szell's effort in the succeeding symphony. The Seventh is among the most played of the nine, and its characterization by Wagner as "the apotheosis of the dance" is among the best known of Beethoven aphorisms. But Szell's penetrating eye for the score dealt less with its orgiastic rhythms than as a blueprint for the orchestra soon to be created by Berlioz.

With a conductor of less taste and discrimination, the resultant emphasis on percussion, on the wind band and its eruptive sounds, on momentum and movement in both the Allegretto and the Scherzo could only have been characterized as erratic and wilful. I found Szell's exposition (plainly justified by the markings in the score) more interesting than convincing, perhaps



because the redistribution of emphasis tended to overstate the unexpected and understate the expected. Another year, let us hope, Szell will expound the same uncommon conception as part of a balanced totality rather than as an over-conspicuous end in itself.

As a late-season spectacular, the Metropolitan presented one of its annual constellations of stellar personalities to borrow the language of the other circus) in a benefit on behalf of its Benevolent and Retirement Funds. Readily recognizable in all their puissance were Joan Sutherland in the first act of *La Traviata*, Renata Tebaldi in the second act of *La Gioconda*, and Leontyne Price in the third act of *Aida*. Less recognizable, but hauntingly familiar for all that, was the same tenor as the boulevardier Alfredo, the pilot prince Enzo Grimaldi, and the Egyptian warrior Radames. Thus did Richard Tucker climax, culminate, and otherwise summarize his twenty-fifth-anniversary season at the Metropolitan, in a range of roles from his very first (Enzo) to one of his most recent (Radames).

It would be stretching truth to say that Tucker has never sung better, for leading tenors—which he has been from the very first—must live upon their capital, however carefully they try to harbor their assets. Tucker has long been celebrated as one of the most abstemious of recent decades where vocal vices are concerned. Thus, if the natural attrition of more than four hundred performances at the Metropolitan alone has taken its toll of pristine tonal purity and vocal shine, he sang quite well enough for any first-time listener to discover just why he still ranks among the day's top tenors. For that matter, it is hard to think of one among them who could have taken this series of stunts in sequence and done them all as well.

Among the notable occurrences of the occasion was Sutherland's Violetta, in whose ball gown she gave every evidence of welcome relief from the shrouds and shackles of the Druid Norma, which has been her sole, steady concern for weeks past. Never has she dressed any role so well in New York, or borne herself so becomingly. That she also sang well is nearly to be taken for granted, but this, too, had vivacity and life beyond her ordinary measure. Miss Sutherland also commended herself to the audience and set a precedent for the evening by falling into a deep curtsy beside Tucker during their curtain call, in homage to his illustrious career. He quickly drew her upright beside him, showering her with appreciative kisses on cheeks and hands. It was that kind of night.

# Defense Business Is Bad Business

by ELIOT JANEWAY

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## REPORT FROM WASTELAND: America's Military-Industrial Complex

by William Proxmire

Praeger, 248 pp., \$6.95

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Senator William Proxmire is well on his way to becoming an institution, commanding more confidence than the military-industrial complex he condemns in *Report from Wasteland* and formidable enough to pose an effective challenge to the power concentrated in it.

Not least among the many merits of this devastatingly documented book is the lucid explanation in it of how Proxmire's investigation of the Pentagon's presumptuousness has turned the tables on one of political Washington's most critical war fronts. When the Senator took on the fight, the Pentagon operated a government within a government, and its power base enjoyed insulation from not merely the grumblings but even the findings of critics. Today the burden of proof has been switched to the Pentagon. Responsible critics of the Department of Defense are no longer suspect, nor are they ineffectual.

Under the American system of divided powers it is axiomatic that Congress cannot govern, and it is also a foregone conclusion that any of its efforts to take over the irreducible prerogatives of the Executive branch will be doomed to failure. The rise of the late Senator Robert A. Taft, and the success of President Harry Truman in arranging Taft's subsequent fall, stand as a classic illustration of this ironclad rule of American governmental operations. Of course, its corollary—that no

President can hope to govern without the active advice and willing consent of the Congress—is equally operative, as the rise and fall of President Lyndon Johnson demonstrates and as the present troubles of President Richard Nixon suggest.

Senator Proxmire is in no danger of losing perspective on the limitations of Congressional power. It is precisely because he understands clearly that investigation cannot take over administration, and that the power to audit and review is not the power to initiate and operate, that he has been so extraordinarily successful in re-enacting the story of David and Goliath, thereby changing the course of history and the balance of power.

"The Budget Bureau," Proxmire quotes Representative William Moorhead (Dem., Pa.) as saying, "trembles before the Defense Department while all other agencies tremble before the Budget Bureau." As recently as late last year it did. But, under the combined impact of Proxmire's revelations from the other side of Pennsylvania Avenue and the pressure from within the White House of former Presidential counselor Arthur Burns (now chairman of the Federal Reserve Board), Mr. Nixon himself has been won over to a belated acceptance of the fact that no coherent offensive against inflation can be mounted, much less won, unless it begins by rooting out the budgetary inflation that feeds upon the dry rot in the Pentagon.

In recognition of the justice as well as the practicality of Proxmire's findings and Burns's urgings, the President moved early this year to subject the Pentagon budget to scrutiny by the Budget Bureau as severe as that normally governing the appropriations claims of the Geodetic Survey, the Consular Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. For the first time, the



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ELIOT JANEWAY is the author of *Struggle for Survival* and *The Economics of Crisis*.