

# Music to My Ears

Irving Kolodin

## The Sutherland-Horne "Norma"; Britten, Niska, and Nilsson

SOME OF the most divinely beautiful music ever written is being almost as divinely well sung in the Metropolitan's new production of Bellini's *Norma*, which culminates, caps, and otherwise climaxes the short list of such ventures for this shortened season. Among its other distinctions, the occasion marked the ascension to equal rank, with the established trio of Joan Sutherland (Norma), Cesare Siepi (Oroveso), and Carlo Bergonzi (Pollione), of the American-born Marilyn Horne, who made her debut as Norma's twin in tragedy, Adalgisa.

For Miss Sutherland, this marked her first appearance in a new Metropolitan production in much too long a time (during which her appearances of any kind in the new theater have been few). Such a career as hers, however long, is always too short, and to have a year or two of it spent entirely elsewhere is a deprivation New Yorkers can ill afford. She returns with vocal splendor undiminished, with her all but inhuman accuracy wholly at her bidding, and the fastidious kind of musicianship that is almost as much a "trademark" as her extravagant coiffure, more subtly employed than before.

In this Miss Horne was Castor to her Pollux. There was neither indecision nor uncertainty in anything she did, despite the conspicuous circumstances. A picture of confidence from the outset, Miss Horne added a new chapter to the history of native-born vocal art, if for virtuosity alone. She was, to this taste, at her finest when she used her lovely *mezzo forte* sound (which carries beautifully), less so when she pushed it a *fortissimo*, and least of all when she leaned heavily on the so-called "chest tones." There are some isolated instances in opera where this heavy, dark sound can be employed to advantage, but there are few such in *Norma*. Her tendency to pull out this stop according to range rather than reason cheapened its value and vulgarized Bellini's intent (the role was, after all, conceived for a soprano rather than an alto).

For the casual operagoer, this version of *Norma* will appeal, then, for the virtuosity of the two female principals, and the compatibility of their "Mira, o Norma" in particular. Thanks to Miss Sutherland's more than ordinarily substantial low range and Miss Horne's

more than ordinarily bright high register, they sometimes create the illusion of the same voice singing two different lines (easy enough in the recording studio but not in the opera house). Indeed, the duetists elected a transposition downward (from F to E flat), though neither would appear to have a range problem. On the other hand, Miss Sutherland provided the listener with the rare experience of hearing "Casta Diva" in G, as written, rather than the lower key of F, in which it is almost invariably performed.

So far as vocalism is concerned; similar compliments could be extended to Siepi, a splendid Oroveso as always, to Bergonzi, a little undersized vocally for Pollione but generally capable (after some initial uncertainties); and also to Rod MacWherter as a superior Flavio. With a full complement of partisans for each present and accounted for, and some partisans just for vocal expertise, generally, they had a fashionable, vocal-minded audience shouting from the outset, and especially on Miss Horne's behalf after Act III (as arranged in this three-intermission affair).

But what of the tensions and the torments, the agonies and the exultations that have, on some occasions, raised Norma to the heroic stature of a Medea, Elektra, or other destiny-fated figure of tragedy? None of those "excesses" this time. In fact, this was on most accounts decidedly an old-fashioned *Norma*, in merits as well as demerits. Beautifully sung, it was almost devoid of effective direction, meaningful action, verbal eloquence, or shafts of dramatic lightning, thus dating to about 25 B.C. (Before Callas).

Despite the fact that the Met's revolving stage was utilized for the first time, to bridge the final pair of scenes (would that it had bridged one of the needless intermissions!) and to move silently, effectively, one of the alignments of Desmond Heeley's unit of huge semicircular "stones" that alternately formed altar, house for Norma, gathering place for the Druids, etc.), the whole thing could have been done on the stage of Carnegie Hall for all the dramatic involvement it conveyed.

There was less direction, from Paul Emile Deiber, in the sense of establishing a credible relationship resulting in drama, than staging, in the sense of moving groups in and out of position and preventing arboreal traffic jams. This may satisfy those who come to

hear Sutherland's Norma, but to those interested in Bellini's *Norma*, whose much-labored-over manuscript betrays an inner agitation not always conveyed by traditional performances of this score, it is simply insufficient, limited, and unsatisfying.

Aside from Siepi, whose impulses are, as they have been for the twenty years since his debut here in 1950, from the inside out, there was altogether too much performance from the outside in—a vocal gloss on a dramatic shell. Admirable as it was in its own restrained way, Richard Bonyng's conducting was all too disposed to favor the vocal patina at a cost to the dramatic structure of which it is a prominent part, but only a part.

At another extreme of the operatic gamut was the first venture since its removal to the New York State Theater of the New York City Opera with Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. The values of the sets designed by Jac Venza were enhanced by the State Theater's stage facilities, though it was arguable whether the layout of the present facility serves the chamber orchestra directed by Charles Wilson as well as the more commodious but more compact surroundings on 55th Street.

One sure gain was the direction of Theodore Mann; another was the first appearance by Maralin Niska as The Governess. This turn of the wheel has provided *The Turn of the Screw* with one of its best embodiments ever of this part. Miss Niska is brighter and stronger in voice than most of the good acting protagonists of The Governess, more powerful in dramatic line and enunciation of the text than most of its good singers. Miss Niska was, in short, first-class.

Also contributory to the good musical and superior theatrical results were John Lankston as narrator of the Prologue, William Dupree as Quint, and the greatly talented Robert Puleo as the doom-destined Miles (June Angela was also admirable as Flora). The roster of principals was completed by Ellen Faull (Mrs. Grose) and Lois Crane (Miss Jessel). The audience for the Thursday night performance did not approach capacity, but it was wholly absorbed in what it saw and heard.

The series of musical events being presented by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in its Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium on behalf of its hundredth anniversary celebration has presented such rarities as Artur Schnabel in a program of chamber music and Sviatoslav Richter in a piano recital in its intimate surroundings, but hardly anything to compare in

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## Durrell and the Homunculi

by ANTHONY BURGESS

"Freedom, freedom, prison of the free"—the phrase comes unbidden to Felix Charlock, narrator of *Nunquam*. It is a line, he says, "from the best of our modern poets," and in Lawrence Durrell's footnote we learn that this is Lawrence Durrell. Critic-bait, evidently: snatch at this, reviewer, gnaw egotism, mock or real, while neglecting some of the faults of the novel itself. On the other hand, it is not a bad thing for Durrell to remind us that he is primarily a poet, and (one has to admit it in the teeth of his avowal) a quite considerable one. The virtues of his novels are the virtues of a poet writing a novel—verbal exactness, wit, color, memorability, the sensorium dew-washed, the feet light. Whenever it can, the prose lyrically takes off, as when the sea-plane starts its descent into the bay of Athens:

We moved now in a great fat bubble of violet and green sunlight, sinking softly down into the darkening bowl to where the city lay atrembling. The night was darkling up over Salamis way. The outlines were turning to blue chalk, or the sheeny blue of carbon paper. But always the little white abstract dice of the Acropolis held, like a spread sail, the last of the white light as the whole of the rest of the world foundered into darkness. Hy-mettus turned on its slow turntable, showing us its shaven nape. We were just in time. We circled the city and its central symbol in time to see what was to be seen.

That is very fine, highly poetic. It has a couple of archaic touches—*darkling* and *atrembling*, which are rather Keat-

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sian—and it turns to something like clumsiness at the end (listen to that *time-chime*), but it is unquestionably the writing of a poet—"modern" if not contemporary.

Unfortunately, the successful writing of novels requires more than a lyric gift. A novelist can have a style like a provincial gossip-columnist's and still produce fine fiction. The prose of *The Way of All Flesh* is decent, like a shabby, well-cleaned suit, but it is hardly up to Durrell at his best. Yet Samuel Butler's people are alive and their actions wholly credible. Butler, along with other non-poetic novelists, such as George Eliot, Trollope, and Arnold Bennett, had the dramatic gift, and this is rarely vouchsafed to lyric poets. Sad but true: Tennyson, as well as Keats, failed at plays, and we can be sure that they would have failed equally (indeed, *did* fail: Look at *The Princess*, *Enoch Arden*, and Keats's jejune epics) in works of fiction. It is in the lyricist's nature to care only about himself, and novels are essentially about other people.

Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* was a great commercial success, chiefly because it followed the best-selling counsel of Pursewarden, the novelist within the novel: "The answer, old man, is sex and plenty of it . . . lashings of sex . . . but remember . . . *stay buttoned up* . . . Try and look as if you had a stricture, a book society choice." There was also plenty of cruelty, *vide* a camel being carved to pieces live in the streets. Above all, there was the exotic, the heavily perfumed, the sense of *sin* as a shopgirl of the Thirties might be taught by *Poppie's Paper* to understand it. But what there was not was character, living people a reader could care about. In best-sellers this doesn't matter much, but many critics have taken seriously the claim of the *Alexandria Quartet* to be literature, a contribution to the art of serious fiction.

In that it showed the old Huysmans



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