

Music to My Ears

Irving Kolodin

An Opera to Forget and a Tenor to Remember

LIKE MANY other operas in the repertory of which it aspires to become a part, Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Most Important Man* ends unhappily. Like practically none other, it also begins unhappily. This is not merely because its principal character finally dies ignominiously like a beast at bay, but also because the beginning idea of wringing lyric sentiment from the subject of a Negro scientist at war with the apartheid society of which he is a part wrung no more meaningful music from Menotti than it does sympathetic attention from the State Theater audiences that are currently viewing its first performances anywhere.

It has long been a part of Menotti's procedure that a central subject motivate him on his way. In *The Medium* it was spiritualism, real and phony; in *The Consul*, displaced persons; in the gay *Globolinks* of recent memory, visitors from outer space. But if these were reasonably successful, religious

fanaticism did not serve so well in *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, nor prisoners of society in *Maria Golovin*. What he has thought to do with racial prejudice in *The Most Important Man* is not only skimpy playwriting, but insufficiently productive of musical impulse.

We are asked to believe that Toimó Ukamba, brilliant black student of scientist Dr. Otto Arnek, will survive a postgraduate course in worldly disillusion and drug addiction to become his "master's" most trusted assistant; conclude the researches that would make the country the most powerful in the world and himself its "most important man"; rebel in rage when the white rulers of his land refuse to meet the conditions he has set upon sharing his research; and turn against his benefactor because he believes Arnek is motivated by prejudice when he takes Ukamba to task for having a covert affair with his daughter rather than speaking openly of their love. One violent action begets another, and Ukamba is finally killed in a kind of stakeout.

Only one thing could justify all this

intrigue and involvement: a surge of fiery music, a torch of burning melody, a swell of harmonic affection for the underdog (such as Kurt Weill partially managed for *Lost in the Stars*, a 1949 view of a not dissimilar subject). An opera lover listening unaware to *The Most Important Man* could not, for the most part, tell whether it related to blacks and whites in South Africa or unhappy artisans in north Italy. Its method has more to do with *Tosca* than with the veldt, and leaves us hoping in vain for new tones, new tunes, new turns of Menottian invention.

As the love-torn embodiment of proscribed passion, Eugene Holmes (a brilliant survivor of the unfortunately deceased Metropolitan National Company) is first-class, with an order of impulse accessible only to one born with the same black skin as Ukamba. Joanna Bruno is a well-sounding, semi-skilled actress as his paramour, Cora; Harry Theyard performs Arnek with the same kind of bumbling authenticity he brought to Albert Gregor in *The Makropoulos Affair*, and Beverly Wolff is consistently wearisome as his overaggressive, self-righteous wife. By much the most expert achievement of the evening was Oliver Smith's evocation of the scene, followed closely by Menotti's staging of his own work and young Christopher Keene's productive music direction. Too bad they were not all involved with a less unhappy problem.

Along with an opera to forget, the week produced a tenor to remember with the latest appearance of Luciano Pavarotti in a Metropolitan sequence that began in November 1968. At that time Pavarotti was fresh from Italy by way of San Francisco, where he had contracted a laryngitis that made singing difficult. Indeed, he decided after a few Met performances that he would be better off in Italy and left without completing his planned appearances.

He wasn't heard again in New York until a few months ago (Edgardo in *Lucia* and Alfredo in *Traviata*) and not at his best until a recent sequence of Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. That any of these did, indeed, represent the best of which he is capable is mere supposition. But the quality of the sound, pure, forward, easily produced, was uncommon enough to make any tenor proud to call it his best. Purely as malleable material, it was something unheard from a newcomer since the first exciting days of Giuseppe Di Stefano.

Mention of Di Stefano is, of course, the surest way to return any aspirant to reality, for these gifts hardly earned their owner the returns they should have. The weight Pavarotti has added since 1968 suggests that the appetite

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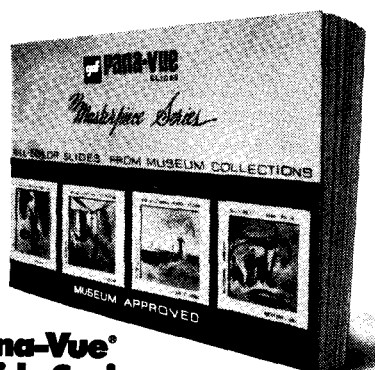
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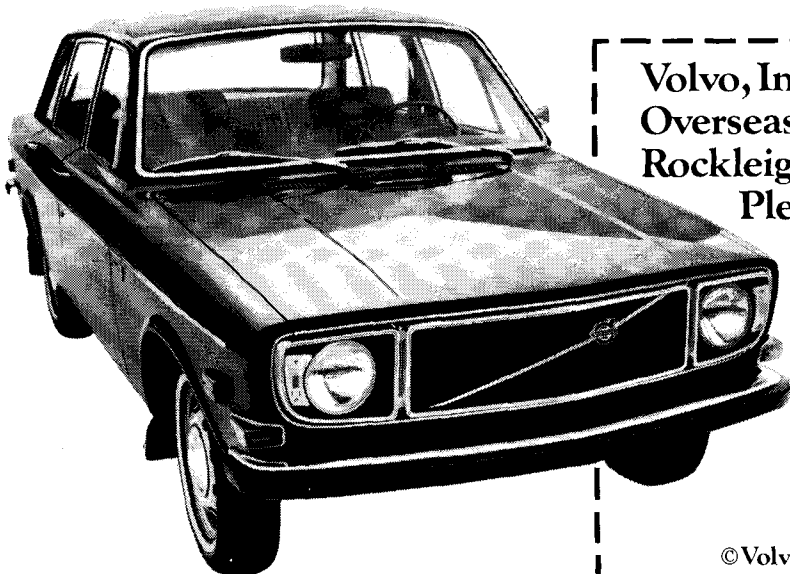
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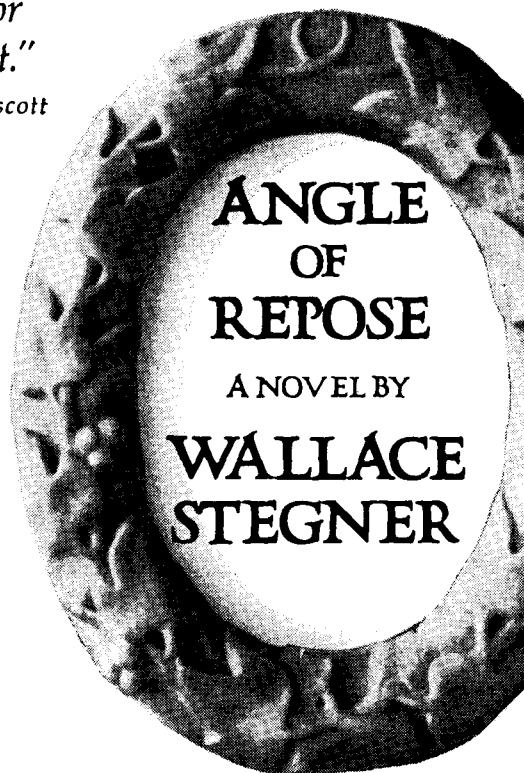
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for eating and drinking demonstrated by the starving poet Rodolfo may be something more than a stage passion. Should he master this inclination before it costs him breath support and sustaining power, the resonance he showed in his "Racconto" as well as the sunburst of a C he produced at the end of the first act duet could qualify him for the kind of popularity the Metropolitan can sorely use in a lyric tenor.

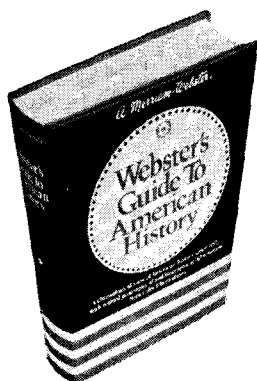
The first of these *Bohèmes* was, in all, much above average, with Dorothy Kirsten impersonating Mimi as well as the voice of experience; Mario Sereni, Robert Goodloe, and Jerome Hines completing a quartet of Pavarotti-worthy Bohemians; and Andriy Dobriansky making more of Benoit than most performers of this part do. Judith De Paul replaced Colette Boky, who was indisposed, as Musetta. Fausto Cleva captained the much-traveled craft with a sure hand.

It was an axiom among orchestral musicians that however the late Wilhelm Furtwängler gave a downbeat, the time to come in was when his right wrist passed the first button on his dress coat. With Karl Böhm, currently guest conducting the New York Philharmonic, the downbeat might be said to occur when his arms fall and his knees bend simultaneously. No matter. The art of command consists of making musicians pay attention, and the Philharmonic's response to Böhm's beat, however wayward, produced a great performance of Bruckner's Symphony No. 8.

More than a few New York seasons pass without even one hearing of this lengthy work, which has been thrice-blessed since last fall. Georg Solti's with the Chicago Symphony was a model of sophisticated orchestral execution, meticulous yet fervent. Zubin Mehta's with The Philadelphia Orchestra was plasticity itself, beautifully turned on the lathe of this superb symphonic machine. Böhm's was, of the three, perhaps the most intensely Brucknerian, dark-hued and sumptuous in its tonal grandeur, stately yet flowing, on the order of what Bruno Walter used to make of it. Nobody now casts quite the spell over this ensemble that Walter did, but Böhm comes closer than anyone else to evoking from it the swelling string sound and deep brass color of the Vienna Philharmonic. Within his tonal compass there was a place not only for the great climax of the Adagio but also for the faint pulsation of the timpani, controlled with superb artistry by Saul Goodman, near the end of the Scherzo. The Mozart Symphony No. 33 began the well-planned program.

When Perry opened up Japan, everyone sang "My Old Kentucky Home."

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He was a two-quart-a-day man (double martinis on waking, if you will). Yet he detested messy drunks, and never missed a performance because of liquor.

He was an insomniac of such proportions that sometimes he could only achieve sleep under a beach umbrella on which a garden hose sprinkled imitation rain. Yet he referred to death (mysteriously, but without real aversion) as "the fellow in the bright nightgown."

He was unforgettably, incomparably, uniquely W. C. Fields, and his lesson was that style, style, style is all. Rhetorical style. Theatrical style. Psychological style. *Style, the surest outward sign of substance, of a special and original inward view.*

And so, it is to this sure, true, blithe spirit, "Uncle Willie," that we dedicate a new magazine. Our name: AUDIENCE. Our purpose: to outfox the fellow in the bright nightgown by keeping you alive to beauty, to humor, to today.

THE PEOPLE

AUDIENCE celebrates excellence wherever excellence is to be found — brownstone, commune, playing field, concert hall, garret, campus, proscenium, foundry, ghetto, chateau, Volkswagen bus.

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THE GRAPHICS

AUDIENCE is published every other month — a magazine for enjoying at leisure. It comes to you in hard covers, without advertising — a magazine for saving. It is designed by Seymour Chwast and Milton Glaser, whose Push Pin Studios recently became the first American design group ever honored with an exhibition at the Louvre. Their pilot issue of AUDIENCE, by the way, has already won top honors from the prestigious Society of Publication Designers — an unheard-of coup first time out.

Specifications? Probably not even a Medici Pope could have commanded a book more opulent, more lavish. 216 square inches to the open spread. And depending on the contents of individual issues, a positively sensuous interlacing of papers. Papers for art reproduction, of a weight and quality for framing, and color plates by the bin. Rich tint papers for text. Typefaces of custom design. Foldouts. Stitchins. Endpapers. And for permanence, heavy board

covers. In graphics, too, AUDIENCE is a celebration of style. A celebration of excellence.

THE DEAL

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Volume I, Number One is now on the press, and as much as we'd like to accept all comers, the print order for this first edition has now been set — an accommodation to collectors.

"Don't let 'em bamboozle you, son,"



Fields once said, "but never drink anything stronger than gin before breakfast, either." Our magazine is guaranteed to please. But if, for some reason, our Volume I, Number One issue *should* leave you feeling bamboozled, return it, and so much for AUDIENCE and you.

CONTENTS OF THE VOLUME ONE, NUMBER ONE ISSUE

"It was Fields who taught us that a man's ideas are not, ultimately, as important as his imaginative stake in reality, and that Earl Long, in his pajamas, with his stripper, is indescribably preferable to Billie Sol Estes, with his Sunday-piety and sex-segregated swimming pool."

John Clellon Holmes has written the dedication of our premier issue to W. C. Fields with "Uncle Willy and Us" Drawings, Edward Sorel.

"Nijinsky had a pair of feet you'd have had to see to believe. His heels and the base of his toes were equidistant from his ankles. No other mammal with feet like that had ever been seen outside Australia."

Nelson Algren writes on a standing skirmish between the dancer and his im-

presario, Diaghilev, by way of proving an Algren theory that integrity in art is "a matter of who swings the mack-erel." Illustration, Milton Glaser.

"Q. If you could change one character trait in yourself, it would be?

A. My shyness."

Answer on a Playmate Data Sheet, required of each candidate before her photograph, posed nude, is considered for a Playboy foldout. The hilarious piece is by Tom Meehan, and it's called "We Like to Find a Late-Maturing Girl." Illustrations, Robert Grossman.

"In a village somewhere in the Ukraine there lived a poor man called Todie. Todie had a wife, Shaindel, and seven children, but he could never earn enough to feed them properly. He tried many trades and failed in all of them. It was said of Todie that if he decided to deal in candles the sun would never set..."

Blend Sholem Aleichem with Hans Christian Andersen, and you get Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Shrewd Todie and Lyzer the Miser," one of two fables clearly marked for posterity in the issue. Illustrations, Seymour Chwast.

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Robert Lewis Shayon

Love That Hate

ARCHIE BUNKER, the ethnocentric, lower-middle-class American WASP (*All in the Family*, CBS-TV, Tuesday nights), doesn't know that he is a bigot and a sinner who sits in judgment on others. If Archie did know—if he were, even in the smallest degree, self-critical and willing to engage in dialogue about his hostility to all groups but his own (he is also idolatrous, fiercely nationalistic, "My country, right or wrong!")—he would be not only the protagonist of a very funny, smash television situation comedy hit but also a powerful vehicle toward the remedying of prejudice. But Archie doesn't know. Apparently, he is unaware of his ethnocentrism, and it is this blindness to his sin, this supreme confidence in his in-group belief-system, that renders him less socially useful than he might be.

Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, the program's producers (who modeled their comedy after the tougher-minded BBC occasional series *Till Death Do Us Part*), might well argue that to diminish Archie's extremism would be to rob him of his dramatic interest. Furthermore, their primary job is to entertain; they cannot be expected, in

a half-hour television comedy, to erode deep prejudices that have withstood the assaults, over the centuries, of moralists and ethical teachers. The issue is debatable, at least. And yet, it is ever a part of television's fascination that when a potentially instructive piece of amusement appears like a tiny sail on television's vast, silent ocean of reinforcement of ingrained attitudes, speculation cannot be resisted. How would Archie react if someone said to him, "Archie, you're a monolith of ethnocentrism"? Experiments in the alleviation of prejudice have suggested that therapy is most effective in group situations, where prejudices can surface in a non-moralistic context, where no one loses status by admitting prejudice, but where, nevertheless, prejudice is seriously condemned.

This is not Archie's context in *All in the Family*. Archie is loved by his wife, his daughter, and his mod son-in-law. He is a blowhard, but he is never mean. He would not, according to Norman Lear, "throw rocks or join the Ku Klux Klan, but he would ask for signatures on a petition to buy back a house on his block that has been sold to a black family." Some victims of bias might reply that Archie's lovable prejudice

is the more insidious, dangerous kind. Each week, Archie is involved harmlessly in a situation that permits him to verbalize freely an abundance of in-group hostilities, using words hitherto forbidden by the Television Code: hebe, coon, spade, wop, kike, polack, etc. Archie wins, Archie loses, but his ethnocentrism is never breached. He awaits next week's lovable encounter with Catholics, Jews, blacks, hippies, commies, et al., with unredeemed lovable hatred.

The novelty is exhilarating. Not since *Laugh-In* or the Smothers brothers' show have people who generally avoid television taken to looking in regularly on a particular program. The fact that the show is done live and is not taped or filmed, before a studio audience whose laughter, though often embarrassed, is natural and not canned; that it has the small-set, small-cast "feel" of television; that its lead time from shooting to airing is only two weeks, thus affording some sense of topicality—all work to make it a unique experience in television viewing. The humor is direct, frank, and explicit (bathroom allusions are common), and most people find it funny (intellectual hardhats laugh, in spite of themselves). Carroll O'Connor (Archie) and Jean Stapleton (his dumb but truth-telling wife) remind many viewers of Jackie Gleason's ménage or of George Burns and Gracie Allen.

Viewer response, too, has been unusual. Most critics have waved banners for the series; mail response has been 75 to 80 per cent favorable. Nevertheless, as this is written, CBS has still not decided to renew the series for the fall. Teachers in schools have asked for study guides to help in analyzing the program in class. There, discussion may take up where *All in the Family* leaves off; the dimension of non-accusatory self-critique may be introduced. I would guess that people with hard-core prejudices would not expose themselves to Archie either on or off the air (unfavorable mail bears this conjecture out). CBS cowcatches the show with a statement that the program is designed to demonstrate the absurdity of prejudice. This in itself is a rejection of Archie and his belief-system. Archie himself, listening in real life, would tune out, because, to himself, Archie is not funny but threatening. The belief-systems of most watchers will be congruent with that of the network, and for these viewers the series will serve as attitude reinforcement—not a small service. But if only Archie could reply to the CBS disclaimer, and if only CBS might admit that it too . . . That would be a dialogue of a higher order, in a more significant family.



"It's not serious; just cut down on talk shows."