

Music to My Ears

Irving Kolodin

A New TV Opera by Britten; Comissiona of Baltimore

FROM ITS OPENING title music, against antique portraits of protagonists in the action, Benjamin Britten's self-conducted, brand-new setting of Henry James's *Owen Wingrave* is something all too seldom offered on television. That is a marshaling of top creative and re-creative talents on behalf of a work specifically conceived for the electronic medium. If it requires, as this one did, combined Anglo-American financing and a joint world premiere, so be it. The results displayed in this country by NET were of an order to merit a sequel anytime Britten is so disposed.

Britten was fortunate to have as verbal collaborator Myfawny Piper, who served so well in their Jamesian predecessor, the much-admired *Turn of the Screw*. This time attention has turned to Owen Wingrave, scion of an eminent British family, who decides that he is not cut out for the military career expected of him. Arrayed against him are a maiden aunt, a retired general (his grandfather), an aspiring fiancée, and her avaricious mother—all of those near and dear to him save his tutor and the tutor's understanding wife. Prompted by the presumption that his stand is an expression of cowardice, the bride-to-be challenges Owen to prove his manhood by spending a night in a room of the Wingrave manor house where an earlier dissident who defied his father had mysteriously died. Those who know their James will also know that Owen's chances of surviving are minimal.

Woven into the subject are a subtle combination of elements close to Britten and identified with such past works as *Billy Budd* (a crisis of conscience); *Turn of the Screw* (an absorption with the supernatural); *War Requiem* (a revulsion against war); Peter Grimes (the individual against the community). This first-time listener (bereft not only of score, but even of libretto) was convinced that Britten had not failed his pre-dispositions. However, I found much of the vocal line spare and aurally uninteresting, possibly because of the composer's concentration on achieving a comprehensible outcome.

There are, however, two scenes of masterly concision and eloquence, and they come where they will do the most good—at the end of both acts. The

first makes shrewd use of television's split screen and superimposed image possibilities to render the thoughts and emotions of the nine leading characters seated at a formal dinner, where Owen's decision is—in his presence—being debated. Into the web of sound, Britten has spun for each a moment of isolation in which to sing his subconscious thoughts (à la O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*). The second scene is at the very end, as each protagonist reacts contritely, ashamedly, or vindictively to the discovery of Owen's dead body. This is pure music drama that does not depend on television devices, but it is beautifully written for the voices.

There is, in fact, hardly any aspect of the production supervised by John Culshaw that is not beautiful. His taste is expressed in the evocative background designed by David Myerscough Jones, the costuming of Charles Knode, the camerawork directed by Brian Large and Colin Graham. The quality of the performance is vouched for by the enlistment of many of Britain's outstanding performers as participants: Peter Pears, brilliant in the character role of the retired general; Janet Baker as the none-too-sympathetic bride-to-be; Jennifer Vyvyan (the original governess in *Turn of the Screw*) as her mother; John Shirley-Quirk, an enormously appealing younger "Mr. Chips" as the tutor; and Heather Harper as his wife. But the most challenging parts are borne with great distinction by the lesser-known Benjamin Luxon as Owen and Nigel Douglas as his friend Tlechmere. *Owen Wingrave* does not show Britten at his greatest as a composer, but it does show him in an adventurous, self-sacrificing, and frequently triumphant endeavor to advance television as a medium of music drama.

Sergiu Comissiona is not a name most Americans interested in music would associate with a conductor of uncommon abilities, but a few more demonstrations such as he gave in Carnegie Hall lately could make a difference. That he did it with the Baltimore Symphony, an orchestra largely of his own creation, rather than with one of long-established quality, was a factor of special credit to the lean, fortyish Rumanian, whose points of progress include Israel and Sweden.

Comissiona commended himself at the outset for his fortitude in begin-

ning with Max Reger's lengthy Variations on a theme from Mozart's A-major Piano Sonata. Most often the complications and complexities Reger imposed on the slight motive are something to endure with forbearance. Comissiona validated his choice with the suavity and sonority, the flexibility and charm, with which his players performed the first half a dozen or so variations. Eventually, the incongruities of Reger's treatment took their deadly toll, but Comissiona's capacity to bring off a musical result was clearly established.

There was less of suavity, more of harshness, in the playing of the C-minor Choral Fantasy of Beethoven (Op. 80), due in no small measure to the overly percussive playing of the solo piano part by Evelynne Crochet. She seemed to regard it as a piano concerto with choral interjections, which is not quite its true character. However, Comissiona had the Rutgers University Choir wholly under his own control in the *Tristia* of Berlioz that followed the intermission, and once again the combined sound was expressive of superior aural discrimination. Both the "Méditation Religieuse" and "La Mort d'Ophélie" had the true Hectorian accent and the "Funeral March for the Last Scene of *Hamlet*" a suitable sobriety. Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* was the somewhat overambitious choice for a concluding selection.

The abundant energies of Pierre Boulez overflowed into another aspect of New York's musical life with his appearance at two concerts of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in Tully Hall. This was the ideal kind of complement to the society's customary preoccupation with the established repertory, for Boulez's choices ranged through the Viennese tradition of wind-ensemble writing from Mozart's serenades to Schoenberg's *Kammersymphonie* (Op. 9) and Berg's *Kammerkonzert*.

Of the numerous Mozart possibilities, Boulez elected the C-minor Serenade (K. 388), known to string enthusiasts in quintet form as well as to a smaller body of connoisseurs in its original octet of oboes, clarinets, horns, and bassoons. Its celestial euphony was realized by Boulez through a leaner, tighter, more *sec* sound than is sometimes heard, but in a transparency of texture that let everything shine through. It was, perhaps, something more than a short step and jump to the Schoenberg *Kammersymphonie*, but the order of its realization by the fifteen virtuosi under Boulez was of a clarity and balance that might have engrossed Mozart, a man with a pretty taste in dissonants himself.

Survival of Man

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bursts of violence in our cities, the pyramiding purchases of small arms by our citizenry, and our continuously mounting police costs all bear eloquent witness to the widespread patterns of aggression and counter-aggression that characterize a society in which each man basically has to look out for himself.

The fact that intrasocial aggression is a characteristic of societies whose institutions compel their members to compete against each other for material security is not an original observation of mine. Many anthropologists have noted this fact in "primitive" societies as well as in "advanced" cultures. On the other hand, they have also noted that in societies in which people must work together cooperatively for their food and shelter, or for other superordinate goals, there are greater group cohesion, less intrasocial aggression, and more emotional security.

Although a cogent argument can be made for the fact that, despite all of its inequities, the free enterprise system—as epitomized by life in the United States—has brought about the greatest technological and scientific advances, as well as the highest per capita production that the world has ever known, the paradox with which we are now confronted is that the very qualities that have made this system so successful now threaten it with extinction. Further technological and scientific advances will be of no avail unless we can develop the moral capacity to utilize them constructively for the benefit of all men; nor does a high per capita production have any meaning for those who are underprivileged unless we can find more equitable processes of distribution. In short, we have now reached a point in history where consistent centralized social planning is imperative for our survival. The free enterprise system, with its built-in profit pursuit and individualistic motivational base, simply does not lend itself well to such planning, which requires a communal rather than an individualistic orientation.

Another sacred cow threatening man's future is nationalism. In a historical past when the maintenance of separate areas of territorial integrity was important to survival, nationalism had adaptive value, but it has now become a maladaptive phenomenon that seriously threatens man's survival. The technological revolution in communication and travel and the inauguration of the nuclear age have eliminated space/time barriers to such an extent

as to make national borders increasingly meaningless.

Patterns of narrow nationalism in many ways parallel those of the free enterprise system. "My country, right or wrong" is the equivalent on the national scale of rugged individualism on the personal scale. Its basic motif is that of competition rather than cooperation, and its consequences are patterns of international aggression and distrust. If man is to have a future on this shrinking globe, the values of "One World" and of "The Family of Man" will have to supplant the ethnocentric biases and suspicions that now set nation against nation and race against race. Such a mature internationalism need not, however, mean the elimination of love of one's own country or the disappearance of cultural pluralism. A man need not care for his family less because he has a profound love for his country; neither need he cherish his country or its culture any the less because he has a deep feeling for the welfare of humanity as a whole.

But we must recognize that the kind of parochial nationalism that views all actions of one's own country in self-righteous terms, and that tends to distrust and depreciate the motives and actions of other countries, does not just happen automatically. It is systematically fostered, developed, and perpetuated in the children of every nation by schools, history texts, and the mass media. Generally, only that small minority in every nation who manage to secure a college education—and by no means all of these—are able to get access to more objective sources of information that might temper such ethnocentrism. Little wonder that many national leaders tend to distrust institutions of higher learning.

Let us turn finally to the third of our sacred cows, one that is closely related to ethnocentric nationalism and is indeed its deadliest by-product: war. Here, too, is an institution around which have evolved deep-seated stereo-

types that constitute powerful psychological barriers to its elimination. Children of all nations are taught that war is right and proper under certain circumstances. War is glorified as brave, just, and honorable, and its brutal realities are obscured by tales of heroism and victory. This glorification of war is so charged with overtones of patriotism that to seek peaceful alternatives is often regarded as subversive and disloyal. Institutionalized value systems such as these do not occur accidentally or capriciously. They are the evolutionary outgrowths of the needs of societies over thousands of years during which armed force had adaptive value in the achieving of urgent national goals. Once such value systems develop, they become self-reinforcing by being built into the personalities of most of the members of the society, and so are transmitted from generation to generation. We are now faced, however, with the stark fact that we have reached a point in human history where wars in the traditional sense can no longer be won, and where even small wars can become the sparks for a nuclear holocaust that might threaten the survival of the entire human race.

What is the role of psychiatry in the future of man? First, I must affirm my conviction that the insights of psychiatry are relevant to problems such as those I have been discussing, and that psychiatrists have an obligation to be concerned with them. Mores and beliefs within a society form a network of integrated circuits that strongly resist change. But the changing of belief systems and attitudes is one of the prime functions of psychiatry. If man must alter many of his fundamental ways in order to survive, then psychiatry has an urgent responsibility to apply its insights toward the facilitating of such change. Psychiatrists cannot stand aside from political mat-

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Scorpio Rising

by Frank Lima

I am standing still I am an old man I am the middle of the sea
in a teaspoon O your beautiful lungs it's too bad I can't
live on land but watch the tides I wrest away the worlds
I bring to you with my big finger to the hush of lava
and whispering arms like the furious lizard in the sun
we dive into a kiss as once a thumb was born to the Mississippi
river sliding down your skirt like a great dorsal and this
weather and its islands are a white machine in my head
as the stars float on top of us and crush the boredom!

Booked for Travel

David Butwin

Summer Over There—II

WE LEFT OFF last week somewhere north of the Matterhorn and east of the Rhine, discussing the pleasant if hectic prospects of touring Europe in the coming summer months. Turning south this week for the conclusion of the series, we pick up the action in the land of Heidi and blubbering St. Bernards.

Switzerland—Like everyone else, the Swiss are turning away from established urban centers and seeking the last frontiers of bucolic serenity. Such a place is Saas Fee, a tiny Alpine resort village that until 1952 was accessible only by mule or foot from nearby Saas Grund. Today, though a road connects Saas Fee from the north, a traveler must deposit his car in a huge parking lot outside the village and thereafter forget about wheels. There are twenty-five small hotels and a few early-closing discothèques and night clubs. Saas Fee is for day people. The glacier that feeds the Saas River is an hour's walk away, and it's not a gasping trek at all; or you can rent a mule and a guide for \$1.25 an hour.

More of a night place, in this same Valais region, is the village of Crans, which is slowly expanding into a large resort complex and beginning to draw

American wanderers along with the French and Belgians. Europe's oldest cog railroad, the Vitznau-Rigi in central Switzerland, will celebrate its 100th birthday by taking passengers up the Rigi in its original steam-driven trains. Folk events will be given on the top of the mountain on weekdays between May 24 and September 25.

Austria—To see how far railroads have come in a century, you can ride the plush new K-Car of the *Mozart Express* that runs daily along the Vienna-Salzburg-Munich corridor. Each train has only one K-Car, which is divided into compartments for two, four, or six riders and comes with private refrigerator and handy hostess. At the touch of a button, the Vienna Philharmonic will burst into *Don Giovanni* or *The Magic Flute*.

Austria may have the first hotel for non-smokers only: the Weinstadt in the secluded mountain village and ski resort of Flachau. There isn't an ashtray in the house, not even in the bar. . . . It's a long way from Banzai Pipeline, but the southern Austrian town of Pörschach is introducing surfing on the thirty-mile-long Wörthersee. The mad genius is an Austrian who picked up the knack while working in Hawaii. The surf is created in the wake of a motorboat, a device not new to land-



locked American sportsmen. An aquatic innovation for Vienna is the ringed city's first indoor swimming pool, built into the Albatros Hotel—not the most auspicious name for a new hotel. You wonder if the place has a thirteenth floor and a black cat for a mascot.

One of the toughest tickets in Vienna has been a performance of the Spanish Riding School. Founded in 1572, the school traditionally performed on Sundays at 10:45 a.m. from March to June and September to December, and the two-century-old Baroque hall seldom had an empty seat. This year the Lipizaner horses will also do their thing Wednesday nights at 7 during the same months, good news to horsey types who sometimes have had to be content with watching practice sessions.

Portugal—The natural scenery on the coast north of Lisbon was never in question: rugged shoreline, pastel fishing villages, and *sargaceiros* (kelp gatherers) working in tunics and helmets that hark back to the Roman occupation. Hotels and other amenities, though, were scarce, so tourist officials promoted Lisbon and the Algarve. This year 1,000 new rooms have opened in the north, continuing a building boom launched in 1969. Three hotels arrive in 1971 at Viana do Castelo, including the first-class Afonso III, which wears a dress of blue and white tiles.

Portugal's north country begins in Porto, a six-hour drive or forty-minute flight from Lisbon. This wine territory produces much port and *vinho verde*, whose vines are strung from trees and arbors. Rosa Ramalho, the Grandma Moses of Portugal, lives in the northern town of Barcelos, where she sells her ceramic figurines. If a decorative first-class hotel isn't a necessity, a *pousada* will do. These government inns, built naturally along hillsides or within

