

MUSIC

Finding the Lost Chord; Graffman; Gibbs

BY IRVING KOLODIN

A rare order of informality pervaded the evening in Philharmonic Hall that brought Pierre Cochereau of Paris to the console of its Aeolian-Skinner organ. In addition to all the other attainments that qualify him to be organist of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Cochereau is an exponent of the art of improvisation.

That is to say, he is one of the few learned musicians of the day who keep faith with a tradition that has passed largely into jazz. Armed only with his own skills, Cochereau demonstrated that improvisation can be done and done well, even with materials of which he had no preknowledge.

Seated with his back to the audience, the better to display his footwork on the pedals as well as his fingering of the manuals, Cochereau was a living embodiment of the organist immortalized in Adelaide Procter's text and Arthur Sullivan's music. He found not only some lost chords but a good many others for which he was artfully searching as he evolved preludes, fugues, variations, and other complicated structures.

Traditionally, themes for improvisation are submitted in the form of intervals with no prior identity. Cochereau accepted the additional challenge of dealing with familiar themes—the better to demonstrate his capacity for transforming them. For the first Prelude and Fugue, he was assigned a fanfare by Jean Mouret, which is associated with a radio program of Ralph Lowenstein, the emcee of the occasion. This afforded barely more than a finger-loosening exercise for Cochereau, whose mastery of contrapuntal combinations, color, and contrast was neatly equal to the task.

When he retired offstage, the choices for the "Symphonic triptyque" were announced to the audience. These were, for rhythmic detail, the March from Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges* and, for melodic contrast, the swelling climax of Sibelius's *Finlandia*. Upon resuming his seat on the organ bench and scrutinizing the thematic skeletons set out on the music rack, Cochereau responded with one of the most elo-



Cochereau in Philharmonic Hall

quent of French shrugs. It said, all too clearly, "What can one do with a perversely chromatic march theme and a decidedly diatonic chorale?"

He then proceeded to do the undoable, by filtering out some of the chromatics in Prokofiev and spicing up the plainer harmonies of Sibelius. This did not come about for some time, as he worked first with one theme and then with the other. Through the application of much aptitude, considerable schooling, and even more ingenuity, he evolved an outcome that was organically—in more than the instrumental sense—unified.

In the succeeding sections of the program, Cochereau undertook to make a blend of materials by Dvorák and Wagner in an "Informal Symphony," also a Chorale and Variations from a "Popular Theme" (as popular as "Jesus Christ Superstar"). The results were both diverting and stimulating, wholly supportive of his reputation as a master craftsman. The next time around, Cochereau should be given matter of less specific association, to promote creativity as well as virtuosity.

Twenty-five years ago Gary Graffman earned a debut in Carnegie Hall by winning second place in a much advertised competition organized to honor the great Sergei Rachmaninoff. He was then a pianist of prodigious promise. At his recent silver anniversary recital in the same hall, Graffman showed that he has applied the intervening years to establish his high rank in a category beyond the qualification of "American." There can be no question of his greatness as a pianist. Graffman has the power, precision, clarity, dynamic range, and wash of tone color available only to the elite. But he is,

even now, far from an unfailingly satisfying interpreter. There were moments in both the Opus 13 (*Pathétique*) sonata of Beethoven and the Handel Variations of Brahms that were uniquely fulfilling of the composer's purpose. Both were preceded or followed by instances of exaggeration difficult to associate with the same performer.

The emerging pattern showed Graffman at his best in the flowing Adagio of the Beethoven sonata and the lyric episodes of the Brahms variations. These were restricted, contained, and superbly controlled. When he had the latitude to unleash his full power, it tended to run amok, take over, go for broke. Thus, witchery in Variation No. 13 of the Brahms (*largamente* is the marking) gave way to butchery of No. 14 (in a faster tempo). He had more malleable material for purely pianistic purposes later on in Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and Balakirev's *Islamey*.

As an incidental detail, it should be mentioned that the pianist who was chosen over Graffman in that famous competition of 1948 and won the riches of a recording contract, a national tour, etc., was Seymour Lipkin. He has since given up serious piano playing and has become a conductor—with far from notable results.

When Raymond Gibbs of Tucson, Arizona, made his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1970, it was as a high baritone, singing the part of Larkin in a revival of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*. As recently as the opening performance of the present season, he was cast as Morales (another baritone part) in the new production of Bizet's *Carmen*.

All the while, however, he has been working on a vocal transition, which culminated in a "second" debut in early April as a lyric tenor in the leading male role of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*. Gibbs is now unquestionably a tenor, and very lyric. He is good-looking, bears himself well, and is secure through the range of the role up to a B-flat. He gave voice to a fluent, well-focused version of "Ah! lève-toi, soleil." This is the showpiece of the part, and it evoked a real burst of applause.

On the debit side, Gibbs has yet to develop the assertiveness that goes with the performer of leading roles, and he let Colette Bokey, the evening's Juliette, outstrip him in their duet. Gibbs has begun his new career from what might be called a standing start, but he has the qualities to go the distance. □

FILM

"Godspell": Dancing in the Streets

BY ARTHUR KNIGHT

There are few things I can think of that are more exhilarating than a really good movie, and few more thoroughly depressing than a really bad one. Part of the depression, I suppose, comes from the realization of how much hope, time, energy, and money goes into the making of any film, good or bad. There is a saying, popular in Hollywood, that nobody starts out deliberately to make a bad picture, and this is probably true. But filmmaking, like any communal enterprise, inevitably involves a certain amount of personality clashes; and in Hollywood, where status is equated with the power one is able to wield, compromise and capitulation is almost the name of the game. A picture may go into production with everyone in enthusiastic accord on script, casting, and point of view; but as the shooting progresses and the images appear on celluloid instead of in the mind's eye, differences of opinion begin to emerge. Then the filmmaking process is turned into a power play, and the picture itself is the ultimate victim. With this kind of tug-of-war going on behind the scenes of nearly every studio-made film, it is little short of a miracle that any survive at all.

One of those miracles has just been effected by Columbia Pictures, however, and I found it an occasion for dancing in the streets—in part, perhaps, because so much of *Godspell* actually does consist of dancing in the streets. And in the streets of Manhattan, at that! New York might seem to be the last place in the world to serve as a backdrop for the Gospel according to St. Matthew, and a clown show the least appropriate device for a retelling of the Jesus story. But somehow, as set to Stephen Schwartz's joyous rock score, it projects all of the innocent faith and fervor of early Christianity as the parables and rituals are re-created in modern terms and then becomes increasingly moving as the Passion approaches its inevitable climax. *Godspell*, with no religious trappings whatsoever, provides a religious experience of extraordinary intensity.

It begins, familiarly enough, with ordinary street shots of Manhattan—the early morning traffic jams, the turmoil of the garment center, a model answer-

ing an agency's "cattle call," a dancer glimpsed through the windows of a rehearsal hall. Before all of them, a quiet stranger appears, peaceful amidst the din and holding out the promise of greater peace. They follow him to the fountains in Central Park, where, in the guise of childlike play, a baptism is performed, climaxed by the baptism of the stranger himself by a youthful, radiant Jesus (Victor Garber). Stylistically, the transformation of ordinary young people into a motley group of

livered as a vaudeville patter number. The inventiveness of the camera work continually transforms the drably familiar city into something fresh and wonderful, simply by looking at it in new ways.

Similarly, the inventiveness of the action itself, much of it mime, provides a seemingly inexhaustible supply of visual surprises. These may, on occasion, become a bit arch, but the youthful cast of ten is so exuberant, likable, and downright talented that one readily



the faithful creates a momentary problem. But so skillfully has director David Greene transformed Manhattan as well, eliminating completely its traffic and its street crowds, that in no time at all it becomes their private world, with an untrammelled beauty that few New Yorkers will recognize. It is as if he shot his entire picture very early on Sunday mornings in October, when New York is not only empty but sparkling.

Never, not even in Mayor Lindsay's fondest dreams, has Fun City looked more entrancing. The cameras swoop and glide among the skyscrapers, discover patches of green on rooftops and beneath the towering arches of New York's bridges, zoom from a glistening spire to a solitary singer performing on a roof blocks away and floors below. The Mall in Central Park provides the setting for a soft-shoe routine. The poster boards at Lincoln Center are mobilized in a kind of Mack Sennett flash-disappearance act for the "mote in thine own eye" parable, de-

forges them for their trespasses. Particularly since they play the Last Supper and the final Agony with such conviction and sincerity, one forgets for the moment the implicit trickery of setting these scenes in a deserted junkyard, with Jesus crucified on a chain-link fence. What really matters are the sober moments after the Crucifixion, when the small band of the faithful quietly remove their mummies' costumes and walk toward the dawn brightening over a deserted Park Avenue. They turn the corner and disappear from view. After a pause, however, the camera follows them and—in as perfect a cinematic metaphor as I have ever seen—reveals that they have in fact melted into the crowd, carrying their new faith with them, sharing it with all. It is a moment of unalloyed joy, of exultation, and of movie-made beauty. It is the perfect finale to a film that, for all its ingenuity, never places sheer virtuosity ahead of its religious conviction. □