

The Met Opera in Japan

by Irving Kolodin

Tokyo may not be Japan any more than New York is the United States, but one thing seems certain after the opening performances of the historic first visit of the Metropolitan Opera company to the Orient. Before the tour is completed, its members are likely to learn as much about themselves as the Japanese have about the art the company represents. That is the consequence of encountering audiences completely candid in their opinions, surprisingly well versed in the works of Verdi, Bizet, and Puccini, to which they have been exposed, and not at all reticent about singling out for approval the things and people that arouse natural, spontaneous reactions.

All the audiences have been prevailingly youthful, avid for new experiences, and passionately attached to what would, to the first-time visitor, seem an art form wildly remote from its basic tastes and orientation. But orientation, in this new Orient, comes from many sources and in many guises. Aside from the electronic indoctrination that abounds on all sides, Japan has previously profited from the flying carpet called the jet, which has enabled it to sample operatic ensembles from Berlin, Paris, Moscow, and Munich, as well as a composite group from Italy.

None of these may have offered so great a concentration of international celebrities as the Met's—Joan Sutherland, Marilyn Horne, Dorothy Kirsten, Adriana Maliponte, and Mary Costa among the female principals; or Luciano Pavarotti, Franco Corelli, James McCracken, Robert Merrill, Cornell MacNeill, John Alexander, and Justino Diaz among the men. Nor have any predecessors offered repertory in Italian and French. But they have certainly prepared local enthusiasts to listen carefully and single out the results most in consonance with their expectations.

My seat location (see ticket below) was identified as 2 fl., C 6, no. 26, which meant the sixth row in a mezzanine set back some 40 rows from the footlights. There were, in this hall seating nearly 4,000, some patches of empty seats at the extremities of a very wide auditorium, including some unoccupied, for the opening performance of Verdi's *La Traviata*, with Joan Sutherland as Violetta. A detail on the ticket



reading Y16,000 translates into \$52 per seat—and there were few cheaper than this, except on the third level (also not sold out). Not that even these stiff prices represented anything like profit: moving, housing, and sustaining the stars and their "support troops" from the United States for close to three weeks ran up a tab of \$2.5 million. The contributing consortium of underwriters, for the visits to Nagoya and Osaka, as well as to Tokyo, was headed by CNH (Chubu Nippon Hosa), a prominent Japanese radio-TV network celebrating its silver anniversary with this lavish outlay of gold.

Despite the distance to the stage, seat no. 26 in the sixth row of the mezzanine offered a remarkably acute auditory image of what was going on in the distance. This was directly attributable to the surpassingly fine sound in the brand-new auditorium (it was opened in

1968), which is immediately adjacent to a pair of striking structures created for the Olympic games of the same year. As these bold architectural innovations (one houses a mammoth swimming pool; the other, a spacious gymnasium) reflect great credit on the engineering imagination of Kenzo Tonge, so the NHL hall speaks eloquently for the team of Japanese acousticians that brought about the splendid results.

According to a Japanese well indoctrinated in the planning, the results were in large part achieved by computer technology. Measurements and materials have been combined to produce an all-purpose hall of such size (basically, a huge broadcasting studio) that, at the remote reaches of the top gallery, the Met orchestra's playing of the prelude to act 4 of *La Traviata* sounded like a string quartet; when this happens, the results have to be dead on target. Perhaps the planners for the forthcoming (third)

try at making a suitable auditorium out of the discredited space within Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center should, before stamping the new scheme "approved," order a computer used by the Japanese. (More likely than not, it was an IBM anyway.)

THE MENTION OF EMPTY SEATS for the first appearance in Tokyo of Miss Sutherland as Violetta may suggest a degree of ignorance among the opera-loving Japanese. In truth, the ignorance was total, and this seemingly harsh statement should be amended to make plain the local mores of operatic presentation. Tickets are sold on the basis of the work to be presented, not on who is to appear in it (from the roster of performers available). Whether it will be Miss Sutherland, Miss Maliponte, or even Miss Costa as Violetta is unknown until the doors are opened and the

posters announcing the evening's cast can be consulted. Then the ticket-buyer takes the 300 pages of composite souvenir brochures (for which he has paid ¥2,000, or eight dollars) and checks off the names of those he is going to hear. Though the price is sizable, the brochure containing libretti of *La Traviata*, *La Bohème*, and *Carmen* in Japanese translations of the original could hardly be duplicated anywhere, at any price.

Miss Sutherland's Violetta was typically well sung, in the restrained, cool manner for which she is globally celebrated, and with the statuesque, rather than endearing, presence for which she is equally renowned. It was received by the audience in a manner that could be described as respectful rather than enthusiastic. The latter kind of enthusiasm went, properly, to the effort of Robert Merrill as Germont Sr. Now verging on the thirtieth anniversary of his operatic debut in the late Forties, this staunch exponent of baritone *bel canto* continues not only to amaze but also to satisfy with a level of achievement now as rich in artistic insight as it is in tonal output. On the other hand, the equally artistic if tonally less suave Alfredo of John Alexander prompted a scattering of boos amid the applause. Apparently, the famed Japanese politeness stops at the point where congenital bred-in-the-bone cordiality becomes corrupted by exposure to the artistic Mafia that makes up the international blood-brotherhood of opera buffs.

If there were among the booers some who had another bundle of yen to admit them to the following evenings's performance of *La Bohème*, they would have heard all the suavity, as well as all the abundant artistry, they could ask from a human throat in the Rodolfo of Luciano Pavarotti. This huge, bearlike man has not been at his best in recent New York appearances. But in the Tokyo-Metropolitan *Bohèmes*, he has been not only in splendid vocal form but also possessed of the impulse to make his esteem and affection for Mimi something more than a way of killing time between solo opportunities. It was honest, sincere, and, above all, a refutation of the too-common contention that Rodolfo's interest in Mimi has to do more with the bed than with the head, and least of all with the heart. The recipient of these attentions was Dorothy Kirsten, whose Mimi has now become a classic study in control and conviction, in the tradition of Bori, Sayão, Albanese, and other such com-

plete Mimis. Despite Kirsten's celebrity, the Japanese picked out for their special favorite the visually vivacious, vocally fastidious Musetta of Mary Costa, whose blonde beauty clearly had a particular appeal for the audience. This was, without doubt, a matter of opposites attracting, for a special memory of the audiences in the KNH hall is the vista from the back of the auditorium: row upon row of black shapes, with each male head cropped in such close conformity to another that all might have been wearing skullcaps.

WHATEVER THE AUDIENCES might have learned from the performers, there was much the visitors could learn from the customs and people they encountered. One was the habit of starting evening performances as early as 6 P.M. (and matinees at noon), because mass transportation closes down at midnight. Another was the presence of digital signs on both sides of the auditorium, which were illuminated at the end of an act and announced exactly when the next would begin. Also, exit lights are exhibited in green, not in red.

If this was a keen reminder of the exotic, chaotic, sometimes quixotic, customs of the East, it was also a reminder that order is more important than the form it takes. I am also reminded that it was a writer in an English-language newspaper who saluted the Metropolitan for a "smash opening" and a Japanese commentator who described it, conversationally, as a "conservative, conventional, middle-of-the-road" presentation. I need not mention which of the two was more accurate. . . . Or which one held up the more accurate mirror to the happening. □

WIT TWISTER NO. 50

Edited by Arthur Swan

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word. Answers on page 61.

The miser _____ the beggars
as he goes—

In place of _____ dispensing
heavy blows.

But those who _____ their
gates against Man's need

Themselves become the captives of
their greed.

A. S.

Seeing Things

Fish Story

It all started with a one-page outline by Peter Benchley and an advance of \$1,000 from a book publisher. The idea had to do with a Great White Shark terrorizing a Long Island community. The idea grew into a book called *Jaws*, which became a huge best-seller, and now there is a motion picture of the same title. A perfect operation, an exemplary working out of a process that calls upon the resources of a writer, agent, editors, hardcover and paperback houses, and a motion-picture company, and is not completed until shown to 60 or 70 million viewers on television. Many such are calculated, but few work so well. The goal is the jackpot. *Jaws* has hit the jackpot with the striking force of a huge shark attacking its prey.

With such cold-eyed calculation behind it, can we expect the film to be any good? Certainly *Jaws* is not *Moby Dick*. But it is a consummately well-made adventure-suspense story, containing moments of horror and terror, a tale of man against monster and monster against man, larger than life, and yet not wholly impossible. The producers, David Brown and Richard Zanuck, who have demonstrated an almost uncanny knack for fashioning huge hits (*The Sound of Music*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *M*A*S*H*, and *The Sting*, among others), gave the job of directing *Jaws* to Steven Spielberg, 26 when he began and now 27, a former film student spotted early on by Sidney Sheinberg, the president of Universal Studios. Spielberg proceeded to demonstrate his talent through some television assignments, a notable "movie of the week" called *Duel*, and, recently, a feature, *The Sugarland Express*. The system, such as it is, appears to be working. The craftsmanship in *Jaws* is stunning.

Enough publicity emanated during the course of production for us to know that Martha's Vineyard was substituted for Long Island as the base of operations, that a monstrous mechanical, electronically controlled shark was used in place of the real thing for some of the scenes, but such facts in no way detract from the effects achieved by the film. It's a five-scream picture—there are at least