

Music to My Ears

The Outmoded Music Director

by Irving Kolodin

IN HIS six years as music director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Pierre Boulez conducted many difficult scores surpassingly well and some relatively simple music ineptly. This paradox posed more than a problem both for his audience, which, on the whole, cared least for what he did best, and for some members of the orchestra, who didn't relish either his best or his worst. The six years of Boulez beam a light on a much wider issue: Is the music director a vanishing species whose function has been outmoded?

For years, the head of an American orchestra was designated "conductor" because he was the one who conducted *all* its activities. Except for an occasional composer who directed his own music, guest conductors were a rarity in a time when an orchestra's schedule was limited to half the weeks of a year.

Almost everything about the conditions just described has changed, beginning with the length of the orchestral season. The

demand for year-round employment has made it essential for the boards of directors of major American orchestras to find work for their players for 44 or more weeks a year, depending on the length of the paid vacation period. This basic economic change has created the need for multiple conductors, one bearing the title of "Music Director."

But what has now changed most of all is the orchestral repertory. At the ceremonial celebration for Boulez, during an intermission of the concert that began his last Philharmonic week, Aaron Copland extolled him for "bringing the orchestra into the 1970s." This remark was lustily applauded by the 30 American composers who had gathered from all over the country to thank Boulez for his efforts on their behalf. Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, and Tchaikovsky were, of course, not represented; had they been, I doubt that they would have joined in the applause.

This change in repertory has created a profound dilemma, and it is not likely to

be resolved by pretending that it doesn't exist or by hoping that it will go away. Elliott Carter, George Crumb, Toru Takemitsu, and Boulez himself are not going to stop composing because a future Philharmonic music director can't deal with what they may write. And, let me add, I do not mean Zubin Mehta, who is already the Philharmonic's music director designate.

How essential, after all, is it for an American orchestra to have a music director? So far as I can discover, the first owner of the title was Leopold Stokowski. After 20 years as conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, he became its music director in 1931. In 1938, the title passed to his successor, Eugene Ormandy. But it didn't come into anything like general use until the late George Szell took over the Cleveland Orchestra, in 1948, with the title of "Musical Director and Conductor."

What Szell had in mind can be deduced from a letter he sent to a friend in 1940, when, still relatively unknown in this country, he had his first guest engagement with the Boston Symphony. "The greatest thing about it," wrote Szell, "was that I met an orchestra that has been trained to make it daily routine to *give its best*." (The italics are Szell's.) The training for which Szell gave praise was to the credit of the authoritarian, long-established conductor of the Boston Symphony, Serge Koussevitzky. Doubtless Szell thought that the more inclusive title might aid him to achieve the same results in Cleveland.

How such a standard can be a moving force in the accomplishment of great results had a resounding demonstration in Carnegie Hall during the same week in which Boulez was taking leave of the Philharmonic in Avery Fisher Hall. In a rare concurrence of quality, the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy performed the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven on Tuesday evening, and the Chicago Symphony under Sir Georg Solti played the same master's *Missa Solemnis* on Friday. The result was two performances on a technical level rarely heard in a lifetime, let alone in the same week.

One could enter some objections to Ormandy's preference for a tempo here, a nuance there, and for the want, in the slow movement and finale, of the mystical quality that pervades this score. But one could not find fault with the transparent glow of the orchestral sound, the total commitment of every player and of every singer in the excellent choir (the Singing City Choir). The vocal quartet was stronger in its female components (Benita Valente, so-



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Peter Schauf

prano, and Claudine Carlson, mezzo) than in its male personnel (Seth McCoy, tenor, and Michael Devlin, baritone).

BY CONTRAST, Solti lacked nothing of the intellectual or spiritual resources to make his first New York performance of the *Missa Solemnis* a true testament to its greatness as Beethoven's ultimate masterpiece. As the powerful expression of faith and hope unfolded, it was ennobled by a unity of effort that partook not only of the sacramental but also of the sacrificial. More marvelous playing by the wind instrument soloists has rarely been heard, and the great soprano Lucia Popp gave leadership to the vocal quartet (which included Yvonne Minton, mezzo, Mallory Walker, tenor, and Gwynne Howell, bass) with an effort that converted performance into an act of affirmation.

Of the two symphonic programs heard earlier in the week, the Mozart-Mahler evening was outstanding for equal justice on behalf of two composers who have little in common save the initial "M." For the Mozart Symphony No. 41 in C ("Jupiter"), Solti had his strings playing chamber music and his woodwinds answering in complementary phrases. In the Mahler Symphony No. 5, the deep gloom of movements I and II was lifted, through the transitional scherzo, to a plateau of tranquillity in the adagietto, from which the sound rocketed to a peak of rapture in the jubilant finale. Like all of Mahler, the Fifth Symphony is inherently autobiographical, and Solti had every detail firmly in hand.

Am I suggesting that it is necessary to forgo the music director, in all the glory of an Ormandy or a Solti, to serve the new orchestral repertory? Not at all. Boulez could have accomplished the best of which he was capable for New York in many fewer than the 416 concerts for which he was responsible in over six years as music director.

What I am suggesting is a new order in which the species *music director* would not merely vanish but evolve into a higher form of human life, the *orchestral director*. This would identify the man who would maintain such a standard as Koussevitzky did in Boston and Szell did in Cleveland and Ormandy and Solti do today. To supplement their efforts and to account for the diversity of the repertory, I would replace the category of "Guest Conductor" with that of "Visiting Specialist."

To be sure, even general practitioners don't make house calls anymore, but artistic ailments might promote a higher order of priorities. ©

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On TV: America's Dances and Dancers

by Walter Terry

THE most important television program in the world—for dance and dancers, at least—is the continuing series of shows called *Dance in America*. Although it was launched early in our Bicentennial year, it is an ongoing project featuring new programs and an array of national, and even international, reruns. The ninth program of the series, “Trailblazers of Modern Dance,” had its premiere in the New York City area on June 22.

One might think that a program titled “Trailblazers” would be first in a series, but *Dance in America* was not plotted chronologically, nor was it planned for telecast in any particular sequence. Each of the hour-long programs is an independent entity and, as such, serves the superseries *Great Performances*, of which it is a part, sharing broadcast time with drama and music specials. The dance project alone is a multimillion-dollar enterprise funded by grants from the Exxon Corporation, the National Endowment for the Arts (an agency of the United States government), and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In America, the programs, shown on various dates and at various times in different cities, are aired by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) stations.

Getting many facets of dance in America on video tape was not simply a matter of filming live stage performances. Each program is in the nature of a documentary, with the director, choreographers, and dancers of a given company discussing repertory, backgrounds, artistic goals, the training of bodies, and the like. In some cases complete ballets are performed, but almost every program also includes scenes or episodes shrewdly selected to show the technical and dramatic range of a dance troupe.

Dance in America programs were videotaped under the most ideal television conditions possible. Several were done at, of all places, Opryland, in Nashville, Tennessee. Lest it be thought that Opryland is simply the site of country music events on a grand scale, let me report that the new

Opryland Productions center boasts what I was told is the most sophisticated TV equipment in the world. Looking with proper awe at the incredible control boards, miles of cable, flashing lights, and vast sound stages, I could believe it. Here, company directors, assisted by their choreographers and ballet masters, conferred and collaborated with TV producers, directors, and cameramen to assure the transference of major stage works to the television screen without violating the choreographic designs originally plotted for stage viewing, while at the same time utilizing the magical mobility of the camera's roving eye.

What has the *Dance in America* series accomplished to date? It has brought classical ballet and modern ballet, avant-garde modern dance and the earlier Martha Graham variety, black dance, jazz, hoofing, gymnastics, and explanations and demonstrations of a multiplicity of dance techniques into thousands of homes and, presumably, to the attention of millions of viewers. A large percentage of these, although increasingly exposed to the art of dance through the burgeoning regional ballet movement in America, would not have seen major companies and celebrated dance stars in their own communities.

At first, the dance companies themselves wondered if the electronic appearances would cut into attendance at their unsubsidized live presentations. They need not have worried. Before the Martha Graham Dance Company made its Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, debut in London a year ago, the British Broadcasting Corporation aired the Graham program from *Dance in America*. The following day, box office receipts jumped 50 percent. Simply as a dividend, hoped for but never planned, television had helped the live theater of dance.

It would be impossible for me to describe each program or, indeed, to list every highlight, but I should like to select certain aspects of the series and appraise their value to dance and dancers and, especially, to the viewers.

The series opened in brilliant fashion in January 1976 with the Joffrey Ballet. Supremely directed by Jerome Schnur, the program begins and closes with an excerpt from a ballet class, the workout familiar to ballet students and stars since the days of Louis XIV. In between, it ranges through extracts from the broad Joffrey repertory, all interspersed with comments by Robert Joffrey himself, by his principal choreographer, Gerald Arpino, and by such legendary titans of dance as Leonide Massine, a product of the Diaghilev Ballets Russes era (1909–29), and the innovative Kurt Jooss, whose *The Green Table* (1932) remains the most powerful antiwar document ever conceived in dance terms.

In the Joffrey program, the first formal dance (following the classroom work) the viewer sees is that of the torchbearer in Arpino's all-male *Olympics*, a reminder, perhaps, that the great city-states of classical Greece could not conceive of training the athlete, warrior, poet, or philosopher without the use of dance. Next follow excerpts from the Massine-Cocteau-Satie *Parade* (Paris, 1917), as avant-garde in its day as Joffrey's psychedelic *Astarte* ballet would be exactly half a century later; the scene at the conference table around which aging diplomats are plotting war (Jooss); Joffrey's rock ballet *Trinity*, performed uncut, and his *Remembrances* (choreographed to Wagner's song settings of the “Wesendonck” lieder).

ALL too often, the camera becomes unduly venturesome and violates a choreographer's design with inappropriate, distorting angles (as happens sporadically in Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring* on another program with another director), but with Schnur directing the Joffrey offerings, there are camera enhancements. For example, in *Remembrances*, a viewer of a live performance in the theater can see that the romantic dances taking place onstage are not real, but rather the dreams of a woman who is present onstage with her meditations. Through the camera's magic, however, with close-ups, dissolves, and slow motion, it is possible for the TV viewer to watch the dreamed dances not only *over* the dreamer's shoulder but actually *through* her eyes (not ours), which penetrate the mist of memory.

Dance in America, in addition to the Joffrey Ballet and the Martha Graham Dance Company entries, includes shows on the American Ballet Theatre, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Pennsylvania Ballet, Pilobolus Dance Theatre, Twyla Tharp and her dancers, Merce Cunningham and