

HEARING THINGS

WHAT IS OPERA?

LOOKING at the billboard of the Metropolitan Opera House one is surprised to see the whole of the lyric stage, from eighteenth-century opera buffa to Wagnerian music drama, conveniently lumped together under "grand opera," a term which rightfully belongs to a certain type of opera that originated in nineteenth-century France. If the leaders of our operatic culture are so hazy about opera it is small wonder that the public at large is entirely at sea when confronted with this hybrid art form. It is pretty generally agreed upon that opera is an impossible combination of music and drama, for the combination of two arts each of which is capable of giving full satisfaction by itself is bound to lead to conflict. If we join two halves we obtain a whole, but when two wholes are pounded together into another whole, plain logic suggests that each will lose in some proportion. Ever since the time of Steele and Addison, opinion has tended toward considering the opera libretto half-drama and its music half-music. As to the public, already considerably handicapped by the obstinate tradition peculiar to the Metropolitan of presenting opera in foreign tongues, it has come to regard the libretto as a thing to be overlooked, and opera as a pretext for singing.

The student of music soon discovers, however, that there is a curious coincidence between a flourishing musical culture and active operatic life. In fact, ever since the seventeenth century the great musical nations have been those which fostered opera, whereas some of the others, such as England and the Netherlands, which hitherto were in the front rank, fell behind when they failed to adopt and to understand opera.

It is a fairly well known fact that opera in this country is monopolized by a minority which claims to be the ordained custodian of this high art. We shall have an opportunity to discuss this queer state of affairs, but first of all we must consider the basic question: what is opera? This is not an easy task, for the literature on opera is negligible—aside from the more or less silly stories about operas and singers. As a matter of fact, it is almost impossible to attack the prob-

lem directly, and I should like to approach it through a parallel, the case of the book illustrator, which, while not exactly identical, comes close to it in principle.

The illustrator of a book does not want to translate the text exactly, for between word and picture there is no such parallelism as exists even between different languages. Not only does a picture express ideas in a different manner, it expresses different ideas. The writer relates the feelings, thoughts, and speech of his characters,



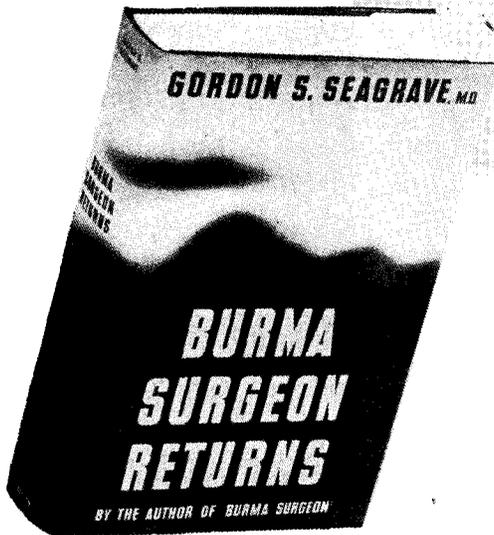
the illustrator renders the facial expressions, gestures, and corporeal attitudes of those same characters and in doing so illuminates their nature. Thus the illustrator is not only a translator of the writer's work, he completes it, for he speaks where the writer remains silent, he is heard where words fail. However, this state of things places the illustrator in a dilemma: can he complement the author's work entirely according to the latter's intentions? More precisely, can he show exactly what the text, within its verbal limitations, intended to express and in the manner intended? This would be impossible. No matter how hard he tries to adhere to his author's intentions, the illustrator will still appear as his own self, his drawing will be his own art and will differ essentially from the vision of the writer. But we might go even further, and conclude that since the writer has certainly said all he wanted to say, every addition to this is an illegitimate interference

with his art, for it actually changes and distorts his creation. Now that is hard to believe, for it would destroy the fondest memories of one's childhood. What pleasure we all derived from picture books, looking at the pictures in anticipation of the story. Can these happy childhood memories, our first sensations of art, be fundamentally inartistic? What children enjoy so tremendously may be naive fable and poor drawing, but cannot be fundamentally wrong. And then we must remember how much the Middle Ages loved the illustrated book; the miniatures, the books of hours, the illuminated missals. They could not have sprung from inartistic sources. There must be a possibility for the illustrator to amalgamate, in a higher unity, all he receives and what he himself contributes. Thus the good illustrator will take the finished and organic creation of the author, and will place his own work beside it in such a manner that the unified result will be a third finished and organic creation.

A similar situation exists in opera. Opera is not "a play set to music," as the dictionaries like to define it, it is a play turned into music, created by music and drama working in conjunction, but a separate entity beyond them both. This makes quite a difference, and anyone who will take the trouble to compare Beaumarchais's "Marriage of Figaro" with Mozart's or Shakespeare's "Othello" with Verdi will readily see that these pairs of works are only distantly related. The plots are approximately the same, although in both instances the skilful librettists knew how to redesign the framework to suit a musical treatment, but the characters of the drama are entirely different, for they are shaped in music.

There is, then, a fundamental misconception in our approach to opera, for opera is not a variety of the spoken drama adorned with music, but an art form that has its own esthetic, dramaturgy, and conventions. As long as we insist on judging it either by purely literary or purely musical criteria we shall not understand it. All the ham acting, amateurish stage business, senseless cutting and rearranging of the score, arbitrary recasting of old libretti can be ascribed to this fundamental ignorance of the nature of opera. It is an autonomous art which calls for specific techniques of administration and performance. The librettist must know these esthetics and techniques, as must the stage director, who cannot be a mere regisseur; the composer must understand the difference between declaiming in music and creating characters in music; the con-

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MARCH 23, 1946

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Clues from the CRIME CLUB

THE book reading public has been led to believe that Intelligence Officers are super-detectives, capable of solving murders which have the police baffled. I sincerely hope that everyone who finds himself confronted by a mystery won't call on a friend who was in the Navy Intelligence to solve it. He may merely find his Naval friend able to read Japanese, censor mail, or interpret aerial photographs.

Fortunately for *Ted Mather*, when he was suspected of murdering his beautiful and amoral wife *Celeste*, his SOS to *Commander Rick Vanner USN* (Intelligence) wasn't futile. *Rick* found that *Celeste* was a woman no other woman liked, no man could leave alone, and that she had acquired debts of passion and money which death had stepped in to meet.

MURDER CANCELS ALL DEBTS is a departure from M. V. *HEBERDEN's* usual stories and is a biting social satire as well as a tensely active whodunit. The wealthy, superficial, self-centered group of people who loved or hated *Celeste*, are vividly contrasted with the Naval Officer on leave, who solves the crime.

MURDER STRIKES AN ATOMIC UNIT is set with faithful realism in the research laboratories of an eastern university where a group of brilliant scientists are working on the problem of U-235 as part of our national race to beat the Nazis for the atom bomb. *Dr. Jeffrey McNeill* was acting as Intelligence Officer of the Atomic Unit. *Jeff* and *Anne McNeill* find there is a probable leak of the vital information from among the group to enemy agents, and *Ames Auger's* sudden death is connected with this leak.

Suspicion and fear split the Unit long before the Unit splits the atom. *THEODORA DU BOIS* has written a suspenseful story filled with frustrated amour, professional jealousy, and the needed secrecy surrounding the atomic research.

Just two invalided Marines are needed to help *Susan Marquette* untangle the unexplained death of her uncle *James* and the confused legacy of a bankrupt de luxe hotel. **SUSANNA, DON'T YOU CRY** by *MARY PLUM* is recommended reading.

The Gunman



ductor cannot limit himself to keeping his ensemble together; the singers must realize that they cannot depend on the larynx only, and most of all, the management must be aware of its role, which is not that of running a third-rate theatre exonerated by good singing.

The Metropolitan Opera House seems to have little conception of all this, and as long as they dictate the fashions in opera, abetted by press and radio commentators, the country as a whole—obviously fond of this form of art—will have no access to opera. There is no earthly reason why opera should not be made available to the people, but the approach will have to be entirely different. Useless, and often offensive, broadcasts between the acts, and puerile opera quizzes are now offered to enlighten the public. This is unworthy of our music lovers and is a sad surrender to the current methods of advertising employed by food and soap manufacturers. If the intermissions cannot be used more intelligently, let us rather have the straight commercial plug of the sponsoring manufacturer, or baseball scores, for what the public needs is not gossip and shop talk but good performances by properly trained ensembles, led not by people who men-

tion Caruso while rolling their eyes, but by persons who realize that we are approaching the middle of the twentieth century, who know what opera stands for, and who appreciate that they are not guarding a musical safety-deposit box but have a mission to carry out to make a great art available to the nation.

There are many good elements in the Metropolitan—the management cannot altogether be blamed for certain social and other conventions which are so ingrained that nothing short of complete reorganization can bring about a change. But the ignorance of our times, of modern methods of opera production—let alone modern opera itself—is unforgivable. Opera is much more advanced in Europe, loud claims to the contrary notwithstanding, and since decentralization, the most urgent need of operatic development in America, is prevented by the indefensible belief that only the Metropolitan represents a true artistic standard, we are left with an obsolescent institution touted as the one and only model. If the Metropolitan insists in holding forth with its faded Victorian splendor behind its new gold curtain, it is hoped that some way will be found to start opera anew, and start it from the twentieth century. **PAUL HENRY LANG.**

The Soldier Who Lived Through the War

By Howard Nemerov

HE sat in a dusty house, and on the shelf
At any sound downstairs, the odd glassware
Would shiver nervously. There did he try
To compose a personal music, an old tune?

He said: I am the relic I, that stood
Where the curling high shock broke, testified
That fragile gewgaws in a storm withstand
Better than buildings the metal violence.

I am such bric-a-brac that once by luck
Outfaced my plaintiff and maligning fate
(As impudence assumed that I was meant)—
And now receive the queer surprise of life.

At fruit in the lacquered bowl, at the tall jug,
At all cool shapes I have stared an hour and more:
I seek a relevance, as anyone would seek,
A bitter imagining of tall buildings.

O husk, O hollow shell, recession of
The intimate: that rhetoric is dead;
The weather of that soul has changed. I must
Perhaps tell pointless stories of the war,

Or keep the silence of my house until
One day exploding with a useless power
I may say, it was like this exactly, like that,
Boom Boom, and saying this, at a great age, die.

Big Ben

A BENJAMIN FRANKLIN READER.
Edited by Nathan G. Goodman.
Illustrations by Fritz Kredel and
R. D. Palacios. New York: Thomas
Y. Crowell Co. 1945. 818 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

FEW indeed are the persons who can possess a set of Franklin's collected works, whether in the Bigelow or the Smyth edition. Both are out of print, rarely found in bookshops, and costly when discovered. Of course everybody can have a copy of Franklin's autobiography in one of its innumerable editions. But that is not enough; it leaves untouched his most important ideas and some of his most delightful writings. What then is the plain man who wants a good representative selection from Franklin's works to do?

The answer is, Buy this book. It is a bargain (well over eight hundred large and well-printed pages for \$3.50) that would have appealed to Franklin's own heart. It contains practically everything that the ordinary reader or student could want: the autobiography, the best scientific papers, the most interesting general essays, a well-chosen group of religious papers, a full hundred pages of political writings, the little-read "Reflections on Courtship and Marriage," and a full body of letters, including a number never before published. Of course there is no end to the Franklin matter that is worth having and reading. It would be easy to suggest additional items that might have been put in—and one does miss the graphic and historically valuable account by Franklin of his meetings with Lord Chatham, for example. But in general a better compilation could not have been made. The book, too, is well ordered. Its contents have not been thrown in chronologically, which would mean haphazardly, but have been grouped under general headings. Franklin thus appears as editor and publisher, as promoter of the general welfare, as practical scientist, as humorist, as colonial agent, as diplomatist, and not least importantly, as family man writing to wife and children. To the whole Mr. Goodman, who has made himself an authority upon Franklin the Inventor, prefixes a judicious biographical essay.

A special word should be said of the illustrations, which present Franklin's birthplace, his press, his bookshop, his electrical apparatus, his fire place, his magic squares, his scientific diagrams, and some excellent facsimiles of letters.

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