

Musicians Speak Out for Nonesuch

Earlier this month, Warner Communications announced changes that appeared to many observers as the termination of Nonesuch, its classical record line. In particular, Teresa Sterne, director of Nonesuch label for the past 14 years, is to be dismissed at the end of this year. It was under Miss Sterne's guidance that Nonesuch produced over 300 recordings, most of them esteemed internationally by critics, musicians and music lovers for their high artistic merit, musical quality and careful presentation. This development has inspired the following letter.

To the Editor:

As members of the musical community who have been privileged to record for the Nonesuch label, we are saddened by the forced departure of Teresa Sterne, who for 14 years had the courage and foresight to build a

catalogue of unparalleled interest, importance and beauty.

PAUL JACOBS
JAN DEGAETANI
GILBERT KALISH
SERGIU LUCA
WILLIAM BOLCOM
JOAN MORRIS
HARVEY SOLLBERGER
FRED SHERRY
DENNIS RUSSELL DAVIES
GERARD SCHWARZ
ARTHUR WEISBERG
PAULO'DETTE
JOEL COHEN
ALEXANDER BLACHLY
JAMES WEAVER
RAYMOND DESROCHES
R. JOHN BLACKLEY
URSULA OPPENS
CONCORD STRING QUARTET
COMPOSERS QUARTET
AMERICAN BRASS QUINTET
PHILIP WEST

Opera vs. the Musical

To the Editor:

Harold C. Schonberg's article entitled "Why Isn't Musical Comedy an Opera?" [Nov. 25] has provoked me to take issue with Mr. Schonberg's response to Marcel Prawy's question: "Will somebody tell me why 'West Side Story' is not an opera?"

I contend that the "aim" of the work has no bearing at all on its classification as opera, Broadway musical or even high art. Although we would "like to think that Mozart composed 'Die Zauberflöte' or that Verdi composed 'La Traviata' out of passionate conviction," the fact is that these composers were deeply concerned about the popular success of their works. They frequently bowed to the dictates of producers and performers, and often completely sacrificed dramatic continuity for the opportunity to display a diva's vocal virtuosity. Furthermore, these works reflected the popular music of their day and specialists were relied upon for staging the production.

The point is that Mr. Prawy has good reason to be so smug because by every derivation, definition and classifica-

Continued on Page 24

Opera Versus the Broadway Musical

tion, the Broadway musical is opera. The only validity to Mr. Schonberg's attempt to classify is a simple matter of logistics — getting the right audience to the right theater. Generally, on the Broadway stage, the audience expects to find works by contemporary composers, while the works of 19th-century composers could be expected at the opera house. As the article details, there are some differences, but both are opera.

STEVEN WIDERMAN
New York City

To the Editor:

The difference between opera, operetta and musical comedy is that musical comedy is made by a committee, consisting of producer, idea man, lyrics writer, story writer and composer; sometimes dancing master and orchestrator. It is a collective effort, and when it has been done even the participating persons may not know any longer who changed what from what into what.

Opera and operetta were always made by two individuals, librettist and composer; there were at times two librettists. Unlike musical comedy, both opera and operetta were finished down to detail before rehearsals for production began. The difference between operetta and opera lies in the caliber of the music. In operetta, the music is entirely superficial, concerned with exploring a good tune and at best creating a mood that is mostly akin to the situations encountered in popular novels; in opera, the music is a psychological portrait of the play.

It is perfectly fair to value "The Merry Widow" and "A Chorus Line" as masterpieces without going into the stark insanity of comparing them to Mozart's operas. It is perfectly acceptable (at least to me) if an opera house adds the successful operetta or musical comedy to its repertory for commercial or any other reasons. I do not believe that any "sanctuaries" need to be protected by stuffy rules of exclusivity.

ERICH LEINSDORF
New York City

To the Editor:

Speaking as an actor, I've never been asked to read from the script in auditioning for an opera production. I've never been cast in a musical comedy without a reading. From the performer's viewpoint, this is the principal difference. In the opera, artistic attention centers on the music. In musical comedy, it centers on the drama.

Acting is an afterthought when we think of opera. Ever notice how historians write of Caruso "singing" this piece or that? To a writer, the active word in describing an opera performance is most often "sang." In musical theater, the performance is too complex to condense into one word. In "West Side Story," the actors danced, stagefought and, above all, acted.

JONATHAN SLAFF
New York City

To the Editor:

I think Harold C. Schonberg missed the point. The question is not one of the composer's artistic intent, for that implies both a lack of seriousness in the work of highly skilled composers of show music, and a fictitious notion of the masters working in pristine isolation from commercial, practical considerations.

Neither is it a matter of the music's intrinsic worth. Only the judgment of history separates gold from garbage, and even that judgment is not everlasting. Also, even operas by mediocre composers are still regarded as operas — lousy ones, but operas nonetheless.

The real question is who composes the work. If we regard Stephen Sondheim as a Broadway tunesmith, "Sweeney Todd" is a musical. If a time comes when he is regarded as a serious 20th-century American composer, the same work will be an opera. It is our attitude toward the composer that determines whether a composition is regarded as popular or serious. If "Sweeney Todd" had been written — note-for-note, identically — by Aaron Copland, for example (never mind the stylistic differences), there is no doubt that it would be an opera, albeit a "showy" one.

Which is to say: the reputation of the creator, not the nature of the creation, tells us what to call the thing.

STEVEN TIGER
Jamaica, N. Y.

without thorough canvassing of the music profession generally. Conductor searches nowadays consult major soloists who have played with many conductors, good and bad. They receive the advice, by no means disinterested but still with a strong element of expertise, of artist managers. Very often the influence of recording companies is felt, for recordings can be a source of prestige and often of income for our top

orchestras. Search committees often sound out critics, whose views hopefully carry more weight than the impact of a candidate's sexual attraction on women's committees. Increasingly the views of orchestra musicians are given great weight, sometimes in a consultation process mandated by the orchestra's union contract.

There is, in fact, a shortage of American conductors on the international

scene, not just in the United States. One theory I have to explain this is that so much of our conducting tradition, as of music training generally, is rooted in a misconception of the alleged literal "fidelity to the score" of such dominant conductors as Toscanini. It is worth noting, in fact, that the most successful of all American conductors, Leonard Bernstein, performs with a personal imagination that is, in many respects,

the very antithesis of the kind of approach instilled by so much American music training. Undoubtedly there are other explanations, but I would not necessarily place all the blame on the way American orchestras are run.

Nor is America alone in "neglecting" its native conductors. In London, the most symphonically active city anywhere, none of the four "independent" orchestras employs a Briton as princi-

pal conductor; the choice is made there, not by boards of socialites and business executives, but by the experienced players in the orchestras. Nor does the government-financed BBC fill its top conducting post with a native. The circumstance that the musical direction of London's Royal Opera is, like that of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, entrusted to a native son, in this case Colin Davis, is exceptional in historic perspective. Across the Channel, in Paris, the leading orchestra is directed by an Israeli, the major opera company by a German administrator and a Hungarian conductor. Even Vienna, that bastion of ingrown musical culture, is about to turn its opera over to a foreigner, and an American at that.

PHILIP HART
Santa Fe, N. M.

On Selecting Conductors

To the Editor:

The way that the 12 to 15 larger American orchestras go about picking their music directors, as cited by John Rockwell in "Does the American Conductor Have a Future?" [Nov. 18] is somewhat more complicated than he describes. Much of what he writes is unquestionably relevant — his definition of the problem, the "community" demands so frequently made on music directors, and the importance of charismatic glamor. "Social climbers and rich philistines" may play a part in deciding who is to lead our orchestras, but other important forces are at play as well.

It is unlikely that a music organization with a budget of millions of dollars will settle upon its artistic direction