

HALÁSZ László



Laszlo Halasz

1956

1956 Aug 26

my Her. Trib

NEW YORK

# Halasz Lists Opera Faults

By JAY S. HARRISON

In the world of the arts there are doers, don'ters and men in the middle. The doers work hard to accomplish some purpose, the don'ters throw up their hands in despair and claim that the progress of music has come to a halt, and the middle men sit back, complain or praise, and give cocktail parties. For his part, Hungarian-born Laszlo Halasz is a doer, a fellow with a goal and the will to pound it through. I am inclined to take bets and even give respectable odds that he succeeds.

Mr. Halasz, you may recall, was general manager of the New York City Opera Co. from its inception in 1944 to his dismissal, after a heated court battle, in 1951. At present, he is Maestro Director—that is his official title—at the Teatro Liceo in Barcelona, a post which makes him virtual dictator over Spain's operatic scene. On a recent trip to the States, however, Spain was not his primary concern; opera was. And about that topic he held forth during luncheon with some—not all—of the following words:

"When I return periodically to America I cannot escape the feeling that opera here is stagnating or, to be exact, regressing. The cause of this sad state of affairs is, in my humble opinion, inflexibility of thought at the top level, which is equivalent to a refusal to recognize a change in the times.

## Recalls Upsurge

"During the last years of the second World War a great operatic upsurge took place in the United States. In addition to the three major opera companies like the Metropolitan, Chicago or San Francisco, numerous new ones sprang up and flourished, such as the City Center and those in St. Louis, New Orleans, Pittsburgh and Newark. I suppose this was a natural result of the influx of numerous artists from Europe, to which an additional avalanche of fine talent was

## Maestro Lays 'Stagnation' To Lack of Top-Level Ideas

added by those who came here after the second World War to seek the paradise of economic and physical comfort following so many years of war-time privation.

"As a result of these conditions a logical 'ensemble' system developed and it proved feasible and possible. With opera becoming more and more popular in our country, more and more Americans sought operatic careers and created, together with the already established European talent, a tremendous pool of artists.

## No New Blood

"But now," said Mr. Halasz, casting his eyes ceiling-ward and his fork into a pile of peas, "let us look at the picture of today. The worst part of this picture is that no new major organizations have been called into existence in the last decade and the long awaited decentralization of opera has not materialized—all we have are big companies touring and touring and touring.

"That is one problem; but there are others. The most important seems to me to be the leading companies' failure to adhere to one or the other line of present day operatic procedures—*staggione* or ensemble. In Barcelona I have learned that only the most intransigent form of *staggione* system can produce artistic perfection and economic satisfaction. In the Liceo every opera receives a minimum of three or a maximum of four performances within only two consecutive weeks and featuring the same cast. Then the opera is dropped for the season. Thus, we never have on the 'decks' more than two operas in any week so we cannot possibly clog our stage and productive facilities.

"Also there is no chance, as in the ensemble system, for the

operas to deteriorate in quality between the first and last performance due to the long elapsed time between them and the necessary changes of cast that go with such a practice. Paper and pencil will prove it—even financially it is cheaper to engage for the smaller roles artists on a single performance basis, paying them well for such single performances and giving them a chance to seek engagements in their periods of freedom. A weekly salary—as one finds in the ensemble system where artists are hired by the season and must stand by—has no value to the artist if he receives pay while he is not working and cannot accept other engagements."

At this point, Mr. Halasz reversed his eating procedure. He flung his eyes at his plate and lifted his fork to his lips. "You see," he said, "the adoption of a full *staggione* system might help the decentralization of opera here by opening possibilities for our great symphony orchestras to present not extensive but at least regular operatic productions. It takes just a little organization to perform the same operas with the same highly selected artists, and whole casts, since they are used to working as a unit, could move from orchestra to orchestra, from town to town.

## On Slide Projection

"And now," he continued, "let us look into the matter of scenery. I cannot refrain from lamenting the absence of the really successful use of slide projection. In the United States the fallacious idea prevails that projection should be used because it is not expensive. This is not so. If it is less expensive than tons of built scenery it is only incidental to the fact that

artistic projection opens wide vistas to the revitalization of all the stodgy aspects of opera. But I want to point out that projection needs real daring—in imagination and in execution. Given both these things, I am convinced that with the introduction of slide projections the expansion of opera via the symphony orchestras of this country can be greatly accelerated and that our permanent institutions will also enrich their scenic effects immeasurably.

"As a finale let me say briefly that the United States has as its duty the creation and support of its opera—a duty which goes with world leadership. In America we reversed the process of culture vs. civilization by first building up civilization and then building up culture. We have to speed up the latter so that it matches our advances in bath tubs and ice boxes.

"If these arguments are not enough then please think about the hundreds of American artists now appearing successfully throughout the opera houses of Europe. Times are changing for them. A chauvinistic spirit is growing throughout the lyric theaters of Europe making it increasingly difficult for these American singers to earn a living. So, they may come home soon. Aren't they entitled to the same concern about their existence that we so deservedly give, for example, to the auto workers of Detroit when there is a slump in the production of our four-wheeled civilization."