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OPERATIC PROBLEMS

Laszlo Halasz Discusses Need for New Works

By OLIN DOWNES

LASZLO HALASZ opens the 1951-52 season of the New York City Opera Company next Thursday night with Massenet's "Manon," which proved the outstanding success of the company's most recent season of last spring. David Poleri, the remarkable tenor featured on that occasion, with Anne Ayars, will again head the cast.

"The Dybbuk" premiere comes October 4. The first American performance of Wolf-Ferrari's opera buffa after Goldoni, "I Quattro Rusteghi," will be given October 18. "The Dybbuk" is the fifth American opera to be produced by this company. The Wolf-Ferrari opus was first presented in Munich in 1906. It was given in Italy in 1914, and has been a parade piece of the Vienna State Opera for years. But this will be the first showing of the work in America. It adds greater novelty to the exceptionally interesting list of works which make the constantly broadening repertory of this enterprising company.

Mr. Halasz, music and artistic director of the company, has given exceptional attention to American works, and the proof of this lies in more directions than the five that he will have given within half a dozen seasons. No less than fifty-one American scores have been attentively examined within the last four years. Three of them, as Mr. Halasz has phrased it, are on the production line. That is, they have proved worthy of production, and initial measures have been taken to calculate the cost of the scenery and costumes required, the question of the music and all the myriad details that have to be in line before an opera is rehearsed or scheduled for performance. These three works may not finally

make their way to the stage. But they are slated as works of merit, to receive actual study when, as, and if the conditions of successive seasons permit.

Hard Lot

"The lot of the American composer is harder in the opera house," said Mr. Halasz, "than in any other field of serious composition. The manager who produces his work has usually to be publisher, proof-reader, and financial wizard in one. This is aside from what should be his sole duty—that of the actual production of the opera. For example, David Tamkin's 'The Dybbuk' has cost us, for the music alone, approximately \$3,500. There was one manuscript piano score. This had to be copied, cut up for different parts for different singers and chorus, and distributed as needed. The orchestra parts had to be copied. The company and the composer divided roughly those expenses.

"We have made our own performances. But it would be no use for me to go into all the ramifications of this business. Except that I must remark on one respect in which the American composer is at a great disadvantage with his European colleague. I speak of the policies, in a majority of cases, at least, of the American publisher.

"The distinction is this: a European publisher is likely to judge a composer's score on what he believes to be its merits, and publish the score. An American publisher waits for a performance, for the press reviews, for the public reception of the work, before deciding whether he will publish it at all.

"Of course I know the special difficulties and expenses of music publication in America. I also believe that directly or indirectly a European publisher receives government subsidy or guarantee of government subsidy for performances of the new work. I do not attempt to judge the motives and circumstances involved.



"We do feel that we have reason for pride in what we have accomplished so far in effectiveness and utmost possible economy of production, and in the building of a truly electric and progressive repertory. You will remember that Prokofieff's 'Love for Three Oranges' was commissioned from him by the Chicago Opera Company, which produced the work and printed the score at the cost of approximately \$130,000.

Now in Repertory

"The opera had three performances. Whether its performance was not eloquent, or whether—what is more likely—the public was not at that time prepared for Prokofieff's style, one cannot precisely know. But we do take pride in the fact that we have not only produced this opera, but done so in a way most cordially greeted by public and press. In fact, we have given this opera secure place in the modern repertory by our production. The cost of our production was about \$10,000. In this instance Boosey and Hawkes immediately cooperated with its publication of the necessary scores, even though the opera has not in the past proved in any way a lucrative venture. And for our initial outlay of \$10,000 we have given, thus far, thirty performances. Nor is this a flash in the pan.

"I want to add this: I discover that American opera audiences are far keener on new works than they are given credit for being. They want novelty. They are just as eager for a new taste, a new style, and fresh ideas, as any European

public. There is a trend, I think, toward the comedic. I think that in these difficult days audiences want something that will be amusing but at the same time adult, as in the case of Prokofieff's extremely witty and modern parody of the romantic opera of the past."

The list of the new productions, and the number of performances that modern works have thus far received, supports the director's assumption. One of the bright particular stars of the company's repertory was Strauss' "Ariadne auf Naxos." It was given fifteen performances in three seasons. "The Old Maid and the Thief," Mr. Menotti's piece, had eight performances in two seasons; the same composer's "Medium" six in two seasons. Of well-known modern works, "Rosenkavalier" had thirteen performances in three seasons. "Salome" had nine performances in three seasons; "Turandot" eleven in two seasons, "Pelléas et Mélisande" eight in two seasons.