

Metropolitan Opera's 'Bluebeard's Castle' —A Giant Step

By Paul Hume

NEW YORK—The Metropolitan Opera took a giant step on Monday night when it presented Bela Bartok's "Bluebeard's Castle" for the first time in the company's history. Many elements in the production, which was twinned in a double bill with Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi," were new. Some of them aroused instant controversy and no little booing.

It was the Metropolitan's first time for staging an opera entirely with projections. The sets, costumes, and projections were the first major assignment given to David Reppa, for some time a member of the company's production staff. And the role of Bluebeard was sung by David Ward, a magnificent British bass making his debut with the Met.

For Bartok's score, written early in this century, the Metropolitan's pit held as large an orchestra as it has ever housed, an ensemble similar in size to that required for Wagner's Ring or "Elektra" by Strauss. It was under the direction of Sixten Ehrling, formerly conductor of the Detroit Symphony, now one of the Met's principal conducting adornments.

The music is fairly well known in Washington, thanks to National Symphony concert performances led by Antal Dorati a season ago and through several notable recordings. But the work belongs to and on the stage, where its symbolic tensions provide the essential backdrop for the two-character drama. Ehrling led the work with superb conviction, sustaining with great skill the thread of movement needed to vitalize the somewhat static stage situations.

Constantly aware of the dangers of the heavy orchestra covering the voices, Ehrling held things well in check except at the great cry from Judith at the opening of the fifth door. Here Shirley Verrett was almost completely inaudible on her high C, though she placed the note perfectly. Ehrling must know that the orchestra at that point can be immensely effective in less than a fortissimo, making a crescendo after the C is ended.

Verrett and Ward moved through the shadowy roles with an easy, fluent manner that paralleled their finely nuanced singing. But there are still serious problems of staging that Bodo Igesz has not been able to solve with the result that too often the two singers are more or less left stranded.

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The controversy arises from the use of projections and from that which Reppa has chosen to project. Certainly projections are a valid and often beautiful and exciting technique. (Part of the Met's problem might be that some of its patrons do not care for any innovations, but the summer audiences are not the regular subscription crowd and the sold-out house on Monday was filled with people who had specifically chosen to hear those two operas.)

Reppa has projected both abstract images and very concrete pictures. When Bluebeard sings, "Here is my arsenal," we see World War II dive bombers. And from time to time faces from history—did I see FDR or Winston Churchill at one point?—come into focus.

A final word of discontent comes to mind over the absence of anything like a vast burst of sunlight at the fifth

door's opening. Surely the darkness which is so integral a part of the play's atmosphere would be even more oppressive if, at that moment, we actually saw the huge light that Bartok has there written into the orchestra.

The double bill will be carried over into the coming season, and the Met management says frankly that some changes could be made if they seem indicated.

Bartok's 2nd

It is easy to forget that Bela Bartok's Second String Quartet is a masterpiece—a work that might be the high point of many another modern composer's whole production—because (like Beethoven's Tenth Quartet) it is overshadowed by the even greater works that followed and is not often heard except as part of a complete cycle.

Saturday night, launching a new series at the Concoran Gallery, the Tokyo String Quartet took Bartok's Second out of mothballs, dusted it off and showed every facet of the music—moody, playful and technically brilliant in turn—to its best advantage.

As in the Mozart B-flat (K. 589) which opened the program and the Brahms A Minor which concluded it, the foursome played with a proficiency that takes all issues of technique for granted and concentrates instead on exploring the finest points of expressive nuance and totally integrated ensemble playing.

—Joseph McLellan

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