

IN THE THEATRE

By JOHN GUTMAN

AS the season enters the home-stretch, we admit that our search for modern music on the Manhattan stage has not found us a winner. At the Met, *Boris*, *Louise*, and Signor Menotti are chalked up as the outer-limits of daring. The first ventures of the American Lyric Theatre, which promises to devote its efforts to more or less modern scores, will come too late, unfortunately, to be included in this last report. If we are not to call it a day with shows, revues, incidental patches of Hammond organ, Mikados innumerable, we have to take refuge up on Claremont Avenue in the end-of-term performances of the Juilliard School.

Their opera department played, for a number of evenings, a double bill consisting of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Ravel's *L'Heure Espagnole*. The performance of the first work was only satisfactory, that of the second excellent; both were highly interesting and revealing. For years, no, for decades, we have been told that there is nothing so plain, so self-understood as the classic style (whatever that may mean), whereas the intricacies of a modern score and of the highly individualized roles make the performance of a contemporary work a very trying task. The evening at the Juilliard School seemed to reverse this dogma entirely. The Purcell left an impression of uneasiness, of stilted pompousness. Nobody knew how to stand, how to sit, or how to move, and the voices, unprotected by an orchestra which is a pedestal rather than a cover, showed their shortcomings in a pitiless nudity. But in the Ravel, orchestra playing (under Stoessel) was smooth, clean, and almost elegant. The students seemed to like performing this tremendously. They played and sang with enormous gusto and a very commendable technic, and with just that semblance of confidence that the Dido performance so conspicuously lacked. The setting, clever in its "modernistic" way, if a little on the gaudy side, helped to make the short hour pleasant. The style was about as French as it was Spanish, and yet all in all it

was an amazingly good American performance.

On another occasion, the Juilliard Alumni disinterred Hindemith's *Hin und Zurück* at Town Hall. This, if by no means an important piece, is a score not to be ignored in the composer's development. He wrote it in 1927, at a time when his visions were still considerably less noble than they now are, when his texts centered on adultery, the benefits of hot water supply, and similar mundane topics. Looking at the earlier scores again we think we prefer his present choice—for him at any rate. The solidity of his handwork, the strictness of his counterpoint do not make him an ideal composer for frivolities of the cabaret metier, in which he indulged on such a large scale later in the opera *Neues Vom Tage*. The joke in Marcellus Schiffer's text was to have a gory thriller reach its climax with a majority of participants dead, and then run it back to the very beginning, gesture for gesture. For such a text one needs, I think, the irony of a Frenchman, say Auric or Poulenc. What attracted Hindemith was the problem of planning a score that, like the action on the stage, would go *hin und zurück*. His fun though quite good is handled rather heavily.

It was left to the Group Theatre to save the honor of a rather ingloriously dying season, by putting on William Saroyan's little play, *My Heart's in the Highlands*. This is the whimsical fable of the "greatest of all unknown poets living" and of a wandering minstrel who is clad in a long white beard, and who, instead of ballads, songs and snatches, plays solemn folk songs on a golden bugle. It provided quite an opportunity for a musician, of which I don't think that Paul Bowles has availed himself to the fullest extent. Playing with folk tunes always leads one to dangerous ground. But Bowles has, on the other hand, the wistfulness, the tenderness and the tact without which the score for such a play would be inconceivable. Still it seemed to me that Saroyan's fantasy could have been served better. A fairy tale that swings so curiously between hearts in the Highlands and debts at the grocery store, might easily employ music of wider range, deeper feeling and, at times, even of more concrete sound.

Of the *Mikados*, *Swing and Hot*, I think I prefer the *Swing*. The later version has beautiful costumes, a greater luxuriance,

prettier girls, better actors and dancers—to say nothing of Bill Robinson—and an overwhelmingly impressive Katisha. But maybe it was just their naiveté and their primitive vitality which made the performance of the Chicago WPA troupe so stimulating, maybe also just being first.

The best of them all however is undoubtedly the *Red Mikado*, this being one of the six sketches which *Pins and Needles* have recently added to their picture book. The new scenes and songs are almost all of them assets, and not their least merit is to have replaced a number of weaker “serious” interpolations. On the whole, the evening is still a riot with the main credit going once again to Harold Rome who is by now established as a master of that pungent style so badly needed in the political theatre. Soap-box, good intentions and the right conviction are obviously not enough. If the political theatre has a message and wants to say it with music, this music must have quick wit, a hitting rhythm, a simple texture, and here and there a show of something more romantic. The Labor Stage’s little revue has all that.

ON THE HOLLYWOOD FRONT

By GEORGE ANTHEIL

UNTIL recently it has seemed to me that Hollywood’s motion pictures were infinitely superior to the European commercial product. They were always at least well made, had a certain lucidity and a sense of audience reaction; also complete disdain for those démodé forms of cinema still dear to the heart of many European producers and for their unnecessarily distorted angle shots, terrifyingly obtuse montages, horribly bad recordings which put music any and everywhere without apparent logic, interminable lengths in the cutting process, and all those 1924 avant-garde features which are a little sad and nostalgic in 1939.

But the latest imports show that this style of movie-making is definitely over. The new films are not “as good as” the American product—they are, emphatically, better. And the new European