

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

## THE BARTERED COW

**J**ACK and the Beanstalk, with the precautionary subtitle *A Fairy Opera for the Childlike*, was given its premiere by the students of the Juilliard School of Music, New York, on the afternoon of November 19, 1931, and thrice repeated thereafter. The performances were attended by crowds of the literary and musical elect. For although the present interest in fairy tales can scarcely be called acute, the names of John Erskine, librettist, and Louis Gruenberg, commissioned composer, aroused the curiosity of a multitude.

The book is the familiar story. "The pleasure of recognition belongs to art," says Dr. Erskine in a program note. The inimitable Erskinian disguise that clothed each incident contributed immeasurably to the joy of recognizing the story as he tells it. Jack is the hero, as in the original; but there is Grecian cunning in his outdoing the Giant, and the wily Odysseus seems the prototype. The Princess is Penelope-like in her patience. The Giant is the villain and Erskine has given him the gluttony, greed and brutality of Polyphemus, and also a sensitivity and sentiment that are irresistibly funny, especially when, like Falstaff, he expresses his more exquisite thoughts in a tenuous falsetto. The Cow in the original was only sold to save the farm, but here she dominates the story with her seasoned knowledge of life.

The everyday speech that most of the characters employ, though beguiling, presented difficulties that might have got the better of many composers. Louis Gruenberg solved them with uncommon skill. He has given continuity and flow to the whole work. There was adroitness in the handling of every scene. Nothing was labored; there were no long, egotistical, barren

stretches. He has no hypothetical objection to spoken dialogue. When Jack prevailed upon the Giant to make the magic harp play for them, it served to bring the music-within-music into high relief.

The scoring is restrained and masterful. The orchestra never swallows up the singers. The climaxes are reserved for their proper places. The music ushering in the giant is the first full blare that the orchestra gives forth. Gruenberg withheld his maximum for that scene, the second in the second act. Restraint of this sort implies that he planned the thing not scene by scene but as a whole. It also implies, over and above a sense of musical form, a sense of orchestral form—an attainment that not all of our composers can boast.

He goes out of his way to avoid the obvious. He delineates his characters without recourse to leitmotifs. The Cow does not moo, the mention of the harp is not echoed realistically from the pit. One regrets that the shortage of male characters prevented his writing the part of the bartered Cow for an expansive contralto. The male voice proved to be thoroughly cow-like, however biologically disturbing.

The music bubbles up and shimmers. It grows almost continually from one theme to another. The few separate songs made one wish there had been more. If Gruenberg has momentarily stepped out of the vanguard, he has done so because he was writing for young singers and players. That he wrote an opera practicable for such performers, without once writing down to them, is greatly to his credit.

The singing was excellent, apart from a few lapses into dialect and indistinct articulation; and the ladies' diminutive waistlines were something quite different from those under which our professional boards are apt to sag. The orchestra outdid itself under Albert Stoessel, who gave a truly plastic and forceful interpretation of the score. The sets by Margaret Linley were often so naively enchanting as to call forth applause. The mechanical devices worked magically. We shall not soon forget that obedient, oviferous hen. And what straining, cackling music Gruenberg gives us while she lays the golden eggs! *Parturiunt montes . . . !*

Whether or not the opera is a masterpiece matters little, especially to the childlike. Whatever conviction it fails to carry arises from a fundamental conflict between the esthetic of the composer and that of the librettist. A virtue of Gruenberg's music is its mystery; a virtue of Erskine's prose is its elucidation. That both together somehow manage to amuse the listener is almost as much a miracle as it is a fact.

*Randall Thompson*

## JANACEK'S HOUSE OF THE DEAD

THE music of Janacek is just as singular as his career—in old age he stepped out of complete obscurity. Unusual, too, are his operas, the text as well as the score. Both of the works concerning the tragic fate of women, *Jenufa* and *Katja Kabanowa*, have been presented in Berlin. The *Listige Füchlein*, a pregnantly symbolic fairy tale of animals and humans, found no welcome in Germany. The *Sache Makropulos* (1926) is the only one laid in the present time, a “business” opera with telephones and hotel rooms. But the heroine is a singer born in 1576 and still surviving. All this material certainly lacks universal appeal. Its diversity is characteristic of Janacek. He has no theory, he did not winnow literature for his compositions; he merely composed to whatever left a deep impression on him.

In his later years Dostoievsky's *Memoirs from a House of the Dead* made a lasting impression on him and he felt the urge to write music to it. He did not, as is usual, have a poet prepare the text and the scenario, but drew it up himself, though he never wrote a formal “book.” The dialog of the novel was set directly to music. From several characters of Dostoievsky, he created a new figure. Scenes were selected, combined, omitted, just as he pleased. It is certainly the most unusual method by which a libretto has ever been composed.

Never have more undramatic events than these in the house of the dead been presented on an opera stage. Three acts deal with the commonplace routine of a Siberian prison where nothing ever happens. The actionless development is introduced and closed by the admission and release of the political