

sical one, is capable of being developed into a vehicle for expressing the whole man, and where that expression is capable of being understood in terms of the whole civilization of which it is a part.

Virgil Thomson

THE EMPEROR AT THE OPERA

IN setting *The Emperor Jones* to music, Louis Gruenberg has brought the play into high relief. He has spurned the composer's time-honored privilege of obliterating the librettist. The play's the thing, he seems to have said, wherein to catch the conscience of the emperor. At every point, the music is subservient to the text. But this self-effacing score is composed with a sense of tempo and dramatic action that produces a nearly perfect synchronization. It is all the more remarkable when one considers the lack of conventional form in the play. The only unity is the dis-unity of fear and flight, the only outward means of unity are the continuous beating of drums and the firing of gunshots to lay the Emperor's fears. The rest is panic and disorder, a crescendo of disintegration. The play itself is a virtuoso description of the very formlessness of fear, and Gruenberg has fully matched the virtuosity of O'Neill. As might have been expected, it is now proved that we have the technic to create American opera.

To say that Gruenberg's setting has produced a play with incidental music, is perhaps to accuse him of not writing an opera. But it was the best possible kind of opera to make of the play. And since it is a play with incidental music, it is as such that it must be judged.

As a play, it is half a play. It is only a nemesis. The first half of the tragedy, whereby one's sympathy should have been aroused, is omitted. As psychoanalysis, it fascinates only insofar as one is fascinated by psychoanalysis. Dogmatically, as an experience of fear, it fails, because the things that frighten Jones do not in the least arouse a similar emotion in the spectator. To be sure, in the first scene, the audience has been told about Jones' experiences. It has, however, not shared in them vividly.

When the supposedly terrible visions appear, they are somehow more attractive than fearsome, more humorous than dreadful. The gunshots that dispel them bring relief to Jones but only a shock to the audience, more disturbing than what they dispel. By one device, however, O'Neill, in the original, succeeded in striking terror to the heart of the listener: the acceleration of drum beats at the moment the shots are fired. This use of drums was a *coup de théâtre* unique in the history of modern drama. Its tremendous effect was achieved by selecting one instrument and throwing out all the rest of the orchestra. In other words, O'Neill, with the power of the drums in mind, omitted the first half of his tragedy and relied on the drums to take its place. Gruenberg has put back the rest of the orchestra, but the frequent tenuousness of the music implies that he tried to preserve the effect of the drums. Unfortunately his screaming interludes by the chorus and orchestra far surpass the drums' sonority.

One wishes too, that the interludes which offered the chief opportunity for real music, could have been less frantic. They have the weakness of uncontrolled rage. They might have had the savage power of patient and deliberate revenge.

The premiere was the occasion for an ovation. Whether credit goes to the play, the music, Tibbett's performance, Serafin's conducting, Mielziner's décor, or a combination of all five, is perhaps beside the point. The work represents a step forward for Gruenberg and so for American opera, and for opera in English. Many an opera has been first a fiasco and then a success. Many another, first a success and then forgotten. Some few have been hailed at the start and have maintained a series of triumphs. It is to be hoped that *The Emperor Jones* will fall into the third category.

Randall Thompson

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WHAT law will determine the eventual ascendancy of one or other of the conflicting forces that come to light in a concert-season today? Will it simply be the advent of some "strong man" who, like his political counterpart of today, will dominate an anarchic situation by sheer personal power? Will