

SOCIALISM AT THE METROPOLITAN

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POPULISM in art is no new esthetic. It has long been familiar to readers of Emile Zola. The operas of Alfred Bruneau are its most extensive musical monument, although the *Louise* of Charpentier is a more celebrated and a more gracious one. In our day the *Mercure* of Erik Satie and the complete works of Kurt Weill have proved that there is still a possibility of touching and vigorous expression in it. *Lady Macbeth of Cleveland and Mzensk* is the latest tribute to its vitality.

I don't think I need to demonstrate that *Lady Macbeth* really does belong to the tradition for which populism is the usual name. Anyone wishing to contest that point had better apply for a little course in nineteenth century art-history. Also anybody who thinks he can dispose of populist art by calling it vulgar or lewd had better do the same. All there is occasion to point out here is that populism is a product of socialist political thought, that it is still currently practised by a far from negligible school of novelists, painters, musicians, dramatists and cinematographers, and that Italian *verismo*, the school of Leoncavallo and Mascagni and Puccini, is not the thing itself but only an exploitation, in the form of really vulgar blood-and-sex melodramas, of its punch without its idealistic content. By really vulgar I mean without any social significance whatsoever or any illusion of same on the part of the librettist or the composer. I may add that Giovanni Verga, the author of a *novella* which served as the basis for *Cavalleria Rusticana*, was a populist of some note and the most serious intentions.

The subject-matter of populist art and its lack of stylistic treatment have always been found revolting by soft or fake-sensitive minds in the upper classes of society. Rarely so by the working classes, who have always loved it, or by that well-known General

Public which includes all classes of society and for which even the most high-toned newspapers publish extensive reports of the daily dramas of love, crime and retribution as they actually take place among us.



Now let us get on to *Lady Macbeth*. First of all, if we count out the so-called vulgarity, there is a good story (incidentally, a true one), a human-interest drama that any newspaper-man or any newspaper-reader can recognize as worth recounting. Moreover, the dramatization of that story has managed to include one or two of almost everything it is pleasant to see on a stage. There are two murders and a rape. There are bedroom scenes before, during and after. There is a whipping scene, a drinking scene, an eating scene, a balcony scene and a boat. The characters represented include the clergy, the military and some well-to-do landowners with their servants and their peasants, as well as a whole stage-full of condemned criminals with their guards. There are manifested before our eyes love, lubricity, anger, jealousy, revenge, physical cruelty, greed, gayety, tenderness, ambition, indignation, disdain, mental anguish and despair. We witness the fatal misbehaviors of human beings as they are torn to pieces on the old dilemma of passion-versus-the-law. We attend a feast. We observe the consolations of religion. Really, what more could one ask? The presence of royalty, perhaps, which has lent dignity to many a more sordid recital. Or maybe a scene in a church. It is pretty hard to get all the sure-fire stuff into one opera. Shostakovitch has done better about it than most composers.

That is probably because, as I said in the beginning, he has an attitude, an esthetic *point de vue*. He is thus able to incorporate everything that could in any way help to point or emphasize his story without the whole thing becoming a vaudeville show. He remains on a height, as it were. That the particular eminence from which he views the carnage is that of Marxian economics and not that of some less actually controversial system of thought is of less importance to the artistic value of his work than the fact of his being on an eminence at all. After all, Mozart had

his Freemasonry, Wagner his Bakunin and his Schopenhauer. An attitude, no matter what it is, channelizes inspiration. And channelized inspiration is style.

Having style, he has no need for voluntary stylization. The naïve variety of his score comes from his youth and from his faith in Karl Marx. It has nothing to do with any cultured or commercial eclecticism.

So far, excellent. Good story, good libretto, good musical talent, all consecrated to an idealistic purpose. The New York audience loved it. The New York critics hedged. In fact, the degree of approval expressed by them was in pretty close proportion to the political leftness of the respective newspapers for which they work.



And now for a few matters that occurred to me as I listened to the performance. Personal reactions and hasty judgments, if you will, but here they are.

I found the first scene a little slow. My interest picked up in the second and continued until the beginning of the last act. Maybe the last act was all right, but for me it was just that old Russian choral-number that we all know so well. Maybe that number is one of the glories of Russian opera. I have never had much taste for it, even in *Boris* or *Khovantchina*. Surely it might as easily have been written before as after the revolution. I suspect the high Marxian tone of having fallen off a bit here. Even the *Rigoletto* parody wasn't as funny as the earlier comic bits.

I found the intermezzi delightful and one or two of them of topnotch musical quality.

I resisted for a time the contrapuntally-accompanied recitative. It seemed to slow up the conversational passages and to give them too much musical interest. About the middle of the opera I began to mind it less, because it did help the continuity, and continuity of musical texture is very necessary to a naturalistic libretto. I still think more strings and less wind would have made the recitations more effective.

I thought the violent scenes and the comic scenes on the whole more effective than the love scenes. That is natural in an objec-

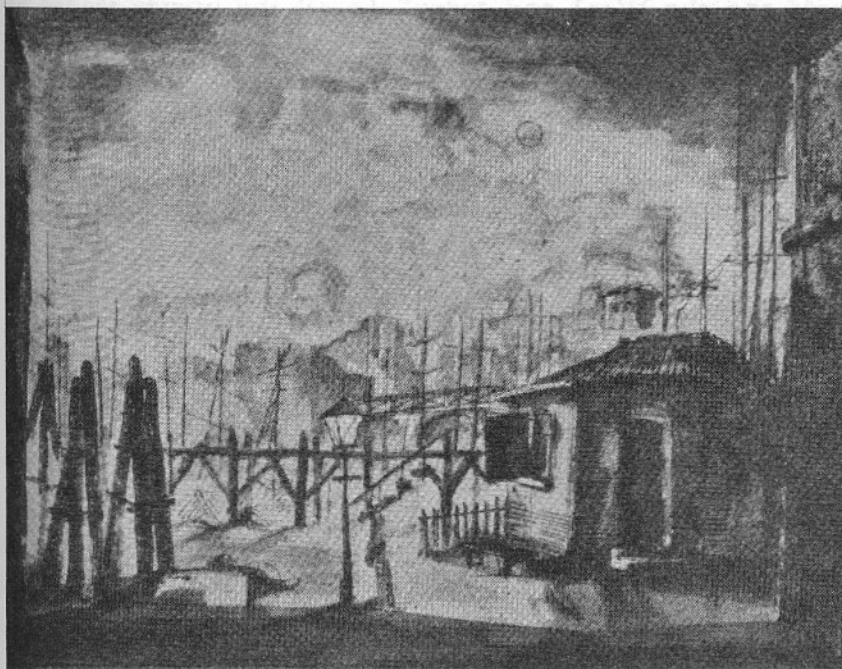
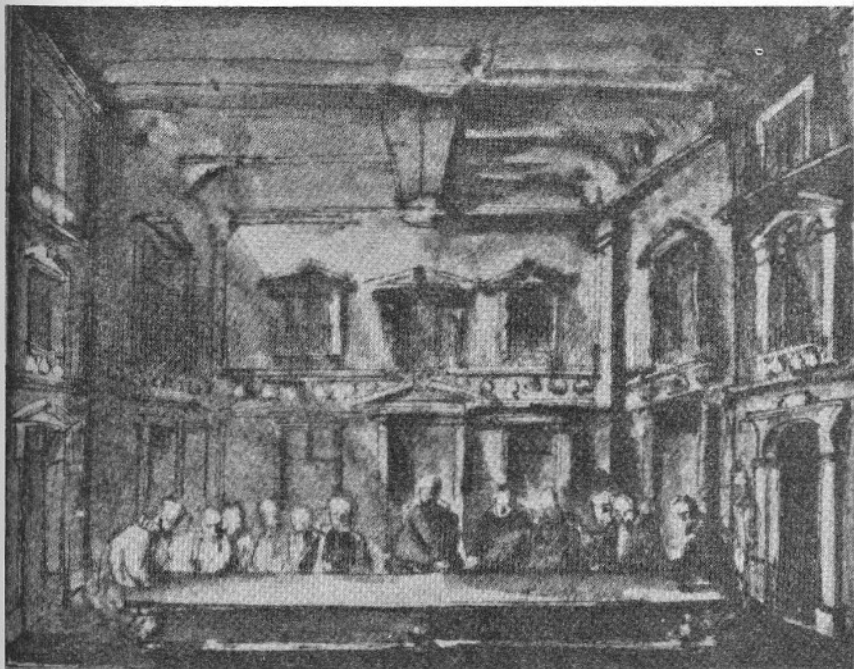
tive technic. The love-duet is a difficult number to write unless one sympathizes with both protagonists.

I don't know any Russian but it was obvious that the musical declamation was well written, since the people present who did know Russian were continually laughing as though they understood what was being sung. So it must have been well written, because it was clear, and clarity is the only test I know for musical declamation. No singer, however good his diction, can put over in the Metropolitan Opera House words that the composer has scanned or cadenced incorrectly.

I don't care whether the conductor's emphases were approximately those currently observed in Moscow or not. It would be surprising if they were.

I enjoyed the gusto with which the opera was written and performed. I enjoyed the freshness, the liveliness, the terrific gaiety of it all, the vividness of its musical description, the healthy humanity of its sentiment. It was like a good and detailed reporting of the story of Ruth Snyder and Judd Grey.

I am not saying *Lady Macbeth* is *Carmen* or *La Traviata* or *Don Giovanni*. It's not. It is an early work, harsh and green and a little indigestible. But there is a kind of passionate objectivity in it and a kind of idealistic purity that cannot be faked or learned. It is serious musical theatre and effective musical theatre. For educated people to protest at this late day about the rough-and-ready tone of socialist art is really just a shade more than stupid.



DÉCOR by CASPAR NEHER
for the Dresden premiere of
the opera, *Der Günstling* by
RUDOLF WAGNER-RÉGENY