

IN THE THEATRE

By VIRGIL THOMSON

MR. ALFRED EINSTEIN posed recently in this paper a curious question. "Shall we return, therefore," he says, "to the audience, to communality, to a direct effect?"

I am afraid he has heard too much so-called "contemporary" music. "Contemporary" music usually means the neo-classic school according to the models laid down in Berlin and Paris between 1920 and 1928 and as expounded nowadays in the better-class English and American universities. Festivals of it are held annually in the more picturesque European university-cities. A week of it is a regular feature of the September (or French) season in Venice.

But does Mr. Einstein mean that anybody really takes the kind of music they play there seriously enough to get worried about it? Or hasn't he been around a theatre in the last fifteen years? What does he think Krenek and Weill were doing all that time? (Stravinsky, I grant, is indirect, but he is a pre-war product.) Does he ignore the work of Henri Sauguet and of Cliquet Pleyel? And of Shostakovitch? And of Marc Blitzstein? And mine too, for that matter. Blitzstein he couldn't have heard much in Europe. The rest he could.

Come, come, Mr. Einstein, you are aware of the direct, communal, audience-element in the music of Strauss and Puccini and Debussy (pre-war, though they were). You've read why Nietzsche preferred Bizet to Wagner. You've heard about *Gebrauchsmusik* and *la musique d'ameublement*. You must know about us, about our principles and traditions if not about us by name. How can you make a crack like that in 1937. Come on over and hear Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*. Just imagine people, high-brow people and plain people, paying money, real money, to hear an opera with no scenery, no costumes, no orchestra, no conductor, and no trained singers. Do come over. The audience alone is worth the trip.

Turning from Mr. Einstein to the real subject, which is Blitzstein's *Cradle*, I wish to jot down the following notes.

1) After six months intermittent playing in town and out, *The Cradle* is still a good show and its musical quality hasn't worn thin.

2) Its weak ending is still a weak ending. I've a low-down suspicion, however, that the hokum of that ending may be responsible partly for the financial success. That ending-on-a-hopeful-note is very close to a fairy-tale, to a sort of (dear Marc, forgive me the wise-crack) opium for the people which makes the social bitterness parts hurt less.

3) It is, take it all in all, the most appealing operatic socialism since *Louise*, and not without serious power. The resources of a rich mind and a skillful technic are employed to tell a story. They are not the story in themselves. He is not saying, "What a fancy composer am I." He is saying what the libretto says, that "there is something damned low about the rich," that "Joe Worker gets gypped," that industrial unionism is a desirable thing. Expounded relentlessly through a bitter beginning, a harsh, comic middle and a noble apotheosis at the end, informed with wit and passion, burning with the red flame of social hatred and glowing with the pure white light of Marxian fanaticism, the work turns out to be, curiously enough, the big charm-number of the year.

This last fact is partly due to its audience, which is one of the most charming audiences in the world. The public that audience represents is one newly amalgamated and hence refreshingly enthusiastic at seeing its own reflection on a stage. It is roughly the leftist front: that is to say, the right-wing socialists, the communists, some Park Avenue, a good deal of Bronx, and all those intellectual or worker groups that the Federal Theater in general and the Living Newspaper in particular have welded into about the most formidable army of ticket buyers in the world. Union benefits, leftist group-drives, the German refugees, the Southern share-croppers, aids to China and to democratic Spain, the New York working-populace, well-paid, well-dressed, and well-fed, supports them all.

The same public can be seen at *Pins and Needles*, revue by Harold J. Rome, (produced by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union), with the same kind faces, good faces, the same humor, intelligence and gusto. All of a sudden conscious

of themselves as a public and proud. They are not unlike a similar public in Paris and in Madrid. And *Pins and Needles* is, of course, with local material, exactly the same intimate political satire revue that flourished so vigorously in France before the war and that aided by depicting the rise of Socialism there.

As for the revue itself, Rome's music is better than most in a Broadway vein, his lyrics are bright and even better than his tunes, the whole performance is smooth, witty and gracious. It is of a great healthiness and a great humanity.

"Shall we return to the audience?" Well, not unless you've got something to say, I imagine.

The audience business amounts to just about this. There are three publics for a serious, self-conscious music.

1) The luxury-trade, capitalist Toscanini public riding with sedate satisfaction in streamlined trains from Beethoven to Sibelius and back.

2) The professor-and-critic conspiracy for internationalist or "contemporary" music which prizes hermetism and obscurantism and makes a cult out of the apparent complexities in systematically discordant counterpoint.

3) The theatre-public of the leftist-front, a public of educated, urban working people who want educated, urban spokesmen for their ideals.

Mr. Blitzstein is our best spokesman for and to this last public. His *Cradle* music, like his *Cradle* audience is frank, exuberant, style-conscious, extrovert. It is intellectually elegant because clear and it is emotionally convincing because felt. It is urbane music for urban people and its gusto is as refreshing as its passion is sincere.

P.S.—The Mercury Theater deserves mention here for its sagacity in ordering incidental-music of *Caesar* from Blitzstein and of *The Shoemaker's Holiday* from Lehman Engel. The music in both cases is just little chunks of appropriate tune or sound effects, like auditory props. In both cases, first-class. This is a kind of musical composition at which only first-class composers are any good, because the ability to say something exact in two bars is, if not the summit of musical art, at least its base and fundament.