

Last night's performance of the work under Laszlo Halasz was a pleasure all round. The orchestra was lovely; the singers sang with style; the staging, if not especially witty or chic, was at the same time neither dull nor clownish. The work was not played for laughs or for easy applause; it was presented as a serious piece of theater, and the audience responded with gratitude to the compliment thus paid its intelligence.

It responded most of all to Virginia MacWatters, who sang the difficult coloratura aria with a purity of style and an accuracy of pitch unmatched in New York City by any other coloratura soprano during my reviewing years. Second in audience favor was Polyna Stoska, who sang the role of the composer. Ella Flesch, curiously, did not work at her best as Ariadne. She is a schooled artist, and her voice is a commanding one. But she mostly stood around looking like the Statue of Liberty and sang flat. The three ladies who waited on her in exile — Lillian Fawcett, Rosalind Nadell, and Lenore Portnoy — sang their trios with skill and beauty. James Pease, as the Music Master, was first-class in every way.

The work itself, from both the literary and the musical points of view, is what the Marxians would probably call "decadent capitalist art." It is shallow of substance and utterly sophisticated in style. It is a masterful display of learning, skill, and deliberate charm, all luxury and no meat. It evokes the eighteenth century through the conventions of the Reinhardt Baroque. It aims, one learns from the librettist von Hofmannsthal's own publicity, at a certain profundity, which this writer finds scant, and at a humor which he finds not very funny. Musically it is an elaborate joke about how much fun it is to play around with the classical techniques.

From any point of view, in fact, it is good to listen to, because it is in its own way a completely successful work. About what its place in musical history will be a century from now I have no guess. But for thirty years it has had a unique place in the contemporary world of music, and the City Center has contributed valuably to New York's intellectual life by making us acquainted with it. Whether in all those thirty years the Metropolitan Opera, upon whom the responsibility for our operatic culture has chiefly rested, could ever have produced it I do not know. Their setup is, of course, almost unbelievably inefficient, and the work requires skill and lots of rehearsal. In any case, the fact remains that *Ariadne auf Naxos* is New York news this morning and its City Center performance musically good news.

OCTOBER 11, 1946

### Warm Welcome

☞ DAME MYRA HESS, who played a piano recital yesterday afternoon in the Town Hall, has, as a musician, instinct and intelligence. She has the quality which in France is called *musicalité*, the gift for making

music sound like music. Also, she is a workman of taste and refinement. She takes convincing tempos, phrases soundly, analyzes a work correctly, executes it with distinction. What she lacks is temperament, the power always to respond in public to her music's own sound, and to add, inevitably, communication. She plays intelligently, and she has a natural nobility. But she doesn't easily "give," as the young people would say.

Her playing yesterday of a Bach French Suite was pleasant, of two Beethoven works (the Six Variations, opus 34, and the A-flat Sonata, opus 110) pretty but distant. It was as if, having known them all her life, she was reminding other musicians of how they went. She did not so much play them as strum them. She exposed them clearly, sounded them out agreeably, but abstained from any personal involvement with their expressive content. The result was hard for a disinterested listener to keep his mind on. And her constant insertion of slight crescendos and decrescendos into every phrase removed from musical design its expressive urgency, reduced all to a lullaby.

Halfway through the Brahms F-minor Sonata (opus 5) a change took place. She got into the scherzo through its rhythm, stopped strumming and really played the piece. From there to the end of the work she made music squarely, forthrightly, convincingly, instead of just dreaming about it in a flowing robe. One realized then that her celebrity is not due merely to her admirable wartime activities. Here her work had a plainness of speech, an impersonal grandeur that was served rather than diminished by refinements of touch and phraseology.

Dame Myra is no devotee of the big tone, though she can play loud enough when she needs to. It is the breadth of her musical thought that gives dignity to her execution. For all the gentleness of her sentiments, the grace of her musical ornaments, the wit of her dry little scale passages, she is not a finicky musician. She is sensible, straightforward, and noble, when she gets warmed up.

Yesterday she was rather slow warming up, though the massive audience had warmed to her from the beginning, had stood up, indeed, to welcome her. Perhaps the gracious speech she made at the end of the first half of the program, in which she thanked America so prettily and with such sweet sincerity for its moral and financial help in continuing throughout the war daily free concerts at the National Gallery in London, had broken down by verbal means her previous emotional reserve. In any case, she was first-class when she finally got going.

OCTOBER 13, 1946

### *German Composers*

☞ MUSICAL COMPOSITION in Germany and Austria, relieved from Nazi censorship by the Allied invasion, has gone back to where it left off