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NEW OPERA ON BROADWAY

"The Medium" is Eerily Melodramatic

EVEN in New Zealand considerable interest has been taken in Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*, first produced in 1945. Excerpts from it have been given prominence in many NZBS programmes, and an essay on the opera in *Penguin New Writing* is by

now familiar to many New Zealanders. In England, Britten's operas are considered to be a milestone in the native development of the form, and the success of *Peter Grimes* gave joy to those critics who opposed the view that opera was at an end, and that "modern political conditions have made it an impossible form of art," as one writer put it. It also seemed to show that audiences, even if they were not tiring of the old favourites, were ready for new ideas and new operatic music.

Evidence of a similar renewal of public interest in the art has appeared in America, where *The Medium*, a "modest opera" by a young Italian-born composer, Gian-Carlo Menotti, has been running continuously on Broadway since May of this year. This is surprising, for America has generally been unkind to modern experiments in the form. Winthrop Sargeant has summed up the position succinctly by saying: "No hope has sprung more eternally in the American composer's breast than that of writing the great American opera. But for a multitude of reasons, including the lack of good drama, lack of technique in writing effectively for voices, and lack of a convenient place where operatic experiments can be tried out, this hope has met with continuous frustration."

Highly Sensational Plot

What then is the explanation of *The Medium's* success? Has opera merely been awaiting the arrival of the man who could put it back on the map? Evidence from England would not appear to support this view, however, for with all the support given for Sadler's Wells, operas by men like Britten, Rutland Boughton, Vaughan Williams, and Lawrence Collingwood have not yet succeeded in competing with Wagner and Verdi in popular repertoires.

Part of the reason for this is the attitude of many people who consider that English is an unsuitable language for opera, and that one must listen with rapt incomprehension to long passages of Italian or German recitative. Contemporary audiences must, therefore, be forced to listen to and enjoy English opera by, if necessary, violent means.

And this is apparently what Menotti has done in the case of *The Medium*. Because of the indifferent success of his two previous efforts, *Amelia Goes to the Ball* and *The Island God*, he has based his third attempt on a plot of a highly sensational nature. It is the story of a fake spiritualist who is suddenly confronted with inexplicable but apparently real evidences of the supernatural. From then on the plot unfolds at an extremely rapid pace with horror after grisly horror, including scenes of maudlin drunken terror, a flagellation, and (in the climax) a terrifying murder. All this may have been done to meet the jaded palates of Broadway audiences, but it has certainly achieved for a time its apparent object (though in a manner different from Gershwin's in *Porgy and Bess*) of making opera popular.

The effects of *The Medium* on American audiences can be judged from what the reviewers say. *Life* calls it "an eerie (continued on next page)"



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