

It was a GRAND OPERA

Written for "The Listener"
by an
ENFANT DU PARADIS

WHEN I went to *Carmen* (Late Door Gallery 2/6) I wore gloves and a fur coat. I had never been to an opera before (I have vague memories of Mother coming home from a touring company's rendition of *Madame Butterfly* in the late 'twenties and saying it was Very Sad), but I have always made a point of listening to the Sunday evening broadcasts of Grand Opera, and so to me opera had something distinctly sabbatical about it. It was something one took reverently, discreetly and soberly, with the brows raised to a decent level.

But from the moment the house lights dimmed and the National Orchestra struck up the overture I felt less sober. When the familiar strains of "Toreador" soared up to the plaster cupids I ceased being reverent. At the first interval I bought a bag of Coffee Mints and in the second a Jumbo Bar. I have never before eaten at any performance at which the National Orchestra has assisted, but by the second interval all my inhibitions had been thawed out and I was enjoying myself thoroughly.



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MUSICALLY *Carmen* is most exciting.

I was tolerably familiar with the better-known passages (did we not have *Gems from Carmen* at home on a gramophone record when radio was merely an overgrown convulsus blossom in the parlour?) but I had no idea how exciting even recitative can sound when sung by the right people. At first I must admit there seemed some incongruity between the banality of the words and the power of their musical expression ("I bear a letter from your Mother." "My Mother?" "Yes, your Mother." "Not my Mother?", etc.) but in no time at all one was transported completely and, as an inhabitant of another world, took for granted the conventions of that world.

I should say *Carmen* was a very good opera to start one's opera-going on. It is almost Cecil B. de Mille in its passion, power and pace. And as one reared to the tradition that prima donnas are fair, fat and forty in age and bust and tenors strictly S.M. I could not help feeling glowingly grateful for Janet Howe and Arthur Servent. (The other points of the Eternal Quadrangle were also of comely proportions.) But though Arthur Servent won my affections by looking (especially when on the outer and upper) rather like Bing and singing rather like Gigli it was the *Carmen* of Janet Howe that kindled the vital spark. She did not merely sing *Carmen*, she was *Carmen*. She seemed to have concentrated in herself all the fire and

fatalism, all the ruthlessness, the greed and the loveliness of Mérimée's original conception. She was an excitement to both eye and ear.

THE whole production was a riot of harmony and colour. Gorgeous girls were well to the fore, and no trouble had been spared to ensure that the Chorus Gentlemen who attracted their amorous glances had a military precision of movement in keeping with their uniform. When occasion demanded the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Chorus

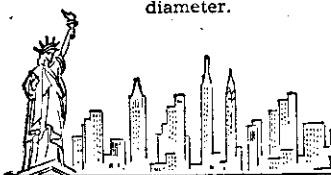
showed themselves quite capable of forgetting that they were ladies and gentlemen, and were indistinguishable from the street sellers, loiterers, bullfighters and factory girls, they were intended to represent. The Chorus of Street Boys was somewhat less representational, but the kemptness and cleanliness of some, especially those with plaits on top was explained when I referred to my programme and found that both

Boys and Boys (Female) were listed in the Children's Chorus. I have seldom seen crowd scenes so well managed (except perhaps by Cecil B. de Mille) and at all times the groupings aided the beauty of the settings. It merely added to the excitement that from where I sat the principals, who tended to make their entrances wherever possible at the head of a flight of steps, invariably appeared feet first, and there was a moment of delicious suspense while one wondered whether these black breeches presaged the dashing Escamillo or the unhappy Don José. Fortunately, the voices were a great help.

LAST Saturday night I followed up my opera-going by settling down in suitably irreverent mood to listen to 2YA's broadcast of the performance. The magic was still there (the gales of laughter from the audience came clearly over the microphone) and hearing the laughter, the applause, feeling the inaudible yet vibrant hum of actor and audience enjoyment, I realised that in this our own New Zealand production of *Carmen* we had got something entitled to be called Opera for the People, not a thing of first nights, filled boxes and decolletage, or even of fur coats, gloves, and intellectual preparedness, but something we should approach as confidently and naturally, as full of joyful anticipation, as a child approaches the known delights of his Donald Duck.



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