

Ten Years of Made-to-Measure Opera

A report from London by ARTHUR JACOBS

COMEDIANS used to have a well-organised line in jokes about opera. ("What's that tent on the stage?"—"That's not a tent, it's the prima donna.") There is a real reason why such jokes are now acquiring the merely historic flavour which attaches to jokes about bloomers, bathing-machines, and timid curates. Opera has become more of a unity and less of an absurdity. It has, of course, its conventions, but, such conventions once accepted, opera companies now pride themselves on absorbing the listener in a consistent and comprehensive dramatic experience.

True operatic drama of this kind has been produced with consistent success by the English Opera Group. It is for this reason that I join in saluting it on its tenth anniversary. Music-lovers will remember that this group, of which Benjamin Britten is the moving spirit, promotes operas far less costly to stage than most—operas using only a tiny orchestra (about a dozen) and usually no chorus. But economy itself, however ingenious, is no artistic virtue. The achievement of the English Opera Group is that, within its deliberately restricted frame of resources, it has produced unified opera of rare quality.

Consider the operas that Britten himself has tailored, made-to-measure, for the group. First of all, *The Rape of Lucretia* (produced in 1946 by the company from which the group was formally constituted in the following year); then the comedy *Albert Herring*; then a new edition of the 18th century classic, *The Beggar's Opera*; then *Let's Make An Opera!* And, two years ago, *The Turn of the Screw*, after Henry James's story. Together they constitute one of the most important achievements of British music since the war. Happily this music

may be sampled on the gramophone: there are excellent recordings by the group of *The Rape of Lucretia* (abridged), and *The Turn of the Screw* (complete), and a recent fairly good issue gives *The Little Sweep*, which is the purely musical part of *Let's Make An Opera!*

Do I seem to be suggesting that the English Opera Group is Benjamin Britten's one-man show? Britten himself tries hard—comically hard, it sometimes seems—to demonstrate the opposite. Not one but five artistic directors are listed for the group, in merely alphabetical order. Besides Britten (true, the alphabet puts him first) there are Basil Coleman, the group's chief stage producer; Michael Northen, a stage technician particularly skilled in lighting effects; John Piper, the artist and stage designer; and Anne Wood, contralto and voice-teacher. But we may be sceptical. Even such a talented team cannot produce, light, design or sing an opera until it is composed. The composer is the king—and rightly so.

But Benjamin Britten has also enlisted other composers, both to write original works for the group and to edit works by composers of the past. Thus Imogen Holst, daughter of Gustav Holst, has re-edited John Blow's *Venus and Adonis*, originally produced at Charles II's court. Thus Arthur Oldham, a young pupil of Britten, decked up *Love in a Village*, an 18th century "ballad opera" with music mainly by Arne. Lennox Berkeley's *A Dinner Engagement* (1954) has won success, in part because Paul Dehn's witty libretto enables middle-class audiences to laugh at aristocrats "impoverished" to middle-class level. But Berkeley's new *Ruth*,

based on the biblical story, I found lacking in theatrical impact: its admirable music would shine better if the work were transferred to the concert-hall as an oratorio.

Inevitably we turn back to Britten himself, since it is his work that has kept the group flourishing. (It has won success at numerous Continental music festivals as well as at home.) The imagination and technical resource with which Britain approaches his miniature orchestra is perpetually astonishing. Or perhaps "miniature orchestra" is itself wrong, and "expanded chamber-music group" would be better: for the players are all treated as soloists and are stirred to prodigious virtuosity. The one-man percussion part in *The Turn of the Screw*, at one point constituting the nearest thing I have heard in European music to African drumming, is worth an essay in itself.

Britten himself frequently conducts the group's performances. But other conductors have included Josef Krips and Boyd Neel. And this season—both in London and at the Aldeburgh (Suffolk) Festival, which focuses on Britten—Charles Mackerras, a young Australian, has won notable success as chief conductor.

And the singers? Instantly, and this is testimony to the dramatic strength of the productions, memorable characterisations of ten years come to my mind. Kathleen Ferrier's noble Lucretia . . . Peter Pears in many different roles, especially as the shy "male May Queen" in *Albert Herring* . . . Gladys Parr as Mrs. Trapes in *The Beggar's Opera* . . . and in *The Turn of the Screw*, the anguished governess of Jen-

nifer Vyvyan, and the astonishing Olive Dyer (herself a mother) portraying a girl of about thirteen.

The Turn of the Screw, the most recent of Britten's operas, is held by many critics to be his best. My own judgment sways between this and *Peter Grimes* (designed not for the group but for a full-scale opera house). I do not object, as some have done, to the psychological shift from Henry James: in his original story we are left in doubt as to whether the evil ghosts are real or not, but Myfanwy Piper's libretto puts them solidly on the stage. But the use of a double prologue—a narrator, whom we never see again, says his quite unnecessary piece before the governess says hers—weakens the opera.

But it has not weakened the English Opera Group. Sustained by a small Government subsidy (£6000 last year, as compared with Covent Garden's £250,000), it fills a unique role in Britain's musical life. It does not function all the year round, but its seasons are frequent and substantial. *Let's Make An Opera!* bids fair to become as well recognised a children's Christmas entertainment as pantomime. Though the repertory of the company still needs expanding, it is large enough for opera-lovers to feel regrets if *Lucretia* or *Herring* happens not to come round in a particular season.

This is opera on a small scale—"chamber opera," as it is sometimes rather foolishly called. It is no more an apology for large-scale opera than a string quartet is an apology for a symphony orchestra. It has won its own artistic justification, and represents a triumph for Benjamin Britten's practical sense as well as his ideals. Truly the gods do not shower their gifts singly: Britten—composer, conductor, and excellent pianist—has shown himself a shrewd organiser, too.



LEFT: Peter Pears as Boaz and Anna Pollak as Ruth in Lennox Berkeley's "Ruth." RIGHT: Jennifer Vyvyan and David Hemmings in "The Turn of the Screw," by Benjamin Britten