

THE LITTLE SCALA

... and the Sensational Callas

by ARTHUR JACOBS

LA SCALA has long been a byword for the highest standards of Italian operatic singing, and for spectacular opera productions on a large scale. The Teatro alla Scala in Milan has indeed occupied its position in the centre of its city since 1788. But since December 26, 1955, the Scala has had what its general director, Dr Antonio Ghiringhelli, describes as its "little sister." The Piccola Scala, or Little Scala, adjoins the main theatre and shares the same management, but presents operas suited to a smaller stage.

Nothing in this year's Edinburgh Festival programme looked more exciting than the announcement that the Piccola Scala was to pay its first visit to Britain. And, now that the Festival is over, I can report that the visit was indeed a delight. We saw four unfamiliar operas, all worth seeing. We heard fine casts, including the reigning celebrity of Italian prima donnas, Maria Callas. And we saw a demonstration of stage production which could give lessons even to the supposedly ultra-polished performances of England's own Glyndebourne Opera.

But here I must put in a qualification. Only one of the operas was originally produced at the Piccola Scala itself: Cimarosa's *The Secret Marriage*. The other three came from the big Scala: Bellini's *The Sleepwalker* (*La Sonnambula*), Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love*, and Rossini's *The Turk in Italy*. Why, then—I asked the Festival director, Robert Ponsonby—was the whole company billed as "La Piccola Scala"? Because, he replied, to advertise it simply as "La Scala" would have implied the use of the full stage resources of the larger theatre, whereas in fact the production had to be scaled down to fit the small theatre available in Edinburgh. And, he emphasised, both the main Scala and the Piccola Scala take their pick of the same lists of singers.

As it happens, *The Secret Marriage* (which did come direct from the Piccola Scala) was the most brilliant of the Edinburgh offerings. Cimarosa lacks the sparkle and inventiveness of his contemporary, Mozart; and this opera lacks the wit and surprise of its near-contemporary, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Yet such was the pace and stylishness of the performance that these deficiencies were almost forgotten. Especially delightful was the performance of Franco Calabrese, as the foppish English "Milord" who wants to marry a

girl who (unknown to him) is married already.

It was Giorgio Strehler, the producer of this opera, who taught Glyndebourne a lesson. Glyndebourne, presenting Italian opera in Italian, has often taken to a kind of desperate miming in order to convey the meaning to an English audience. A character could hardly utter the word "naso" or "occhio" without pointing to his nose or his eye. The Italian company, free from this fault, made much more subtle use of stage movement—and, despite the language barrier, kept the audience wonderfully entertained.

Rossini's *The Turk in Italy* was not given such an accomplished staging, but what a joy it was to see it presented! This opera was given (in an English version by the present writer) by students at University College, London, last year, but is otherwise known here only from gramophone records. Its sparkling music and clever plot (in which a poet-dramatist comes on to the stage and "manipulates" the other characters) point a lesson which has been demonstrated in many other European opera-houses in recent years—that there is a whole storehouse of enjoyable unfamiliar Rossini ready to be consumed by those who will reach beyond *The Barber of Seville*.

The Elixir of Love has fairly often been given in London in recent years, and everyone interested in Italian opera (even if only on gramophone records) knows the famous pathetic tenor aria, "Una Furtiva Lagrima." But how boldly the Milan company approached this aria! Defying the usual rigid barrier between the sentimental and the comic, they mixed the two. The hero, about to sing this song, came in comically

loaded with rifle and military uniform, in token of his recent reluctant enlistment. Never have I seen this stupid but lovable hero's part so capitally undertaken as by Giuseppe di Stefano (whom record collectors, once again, will know).

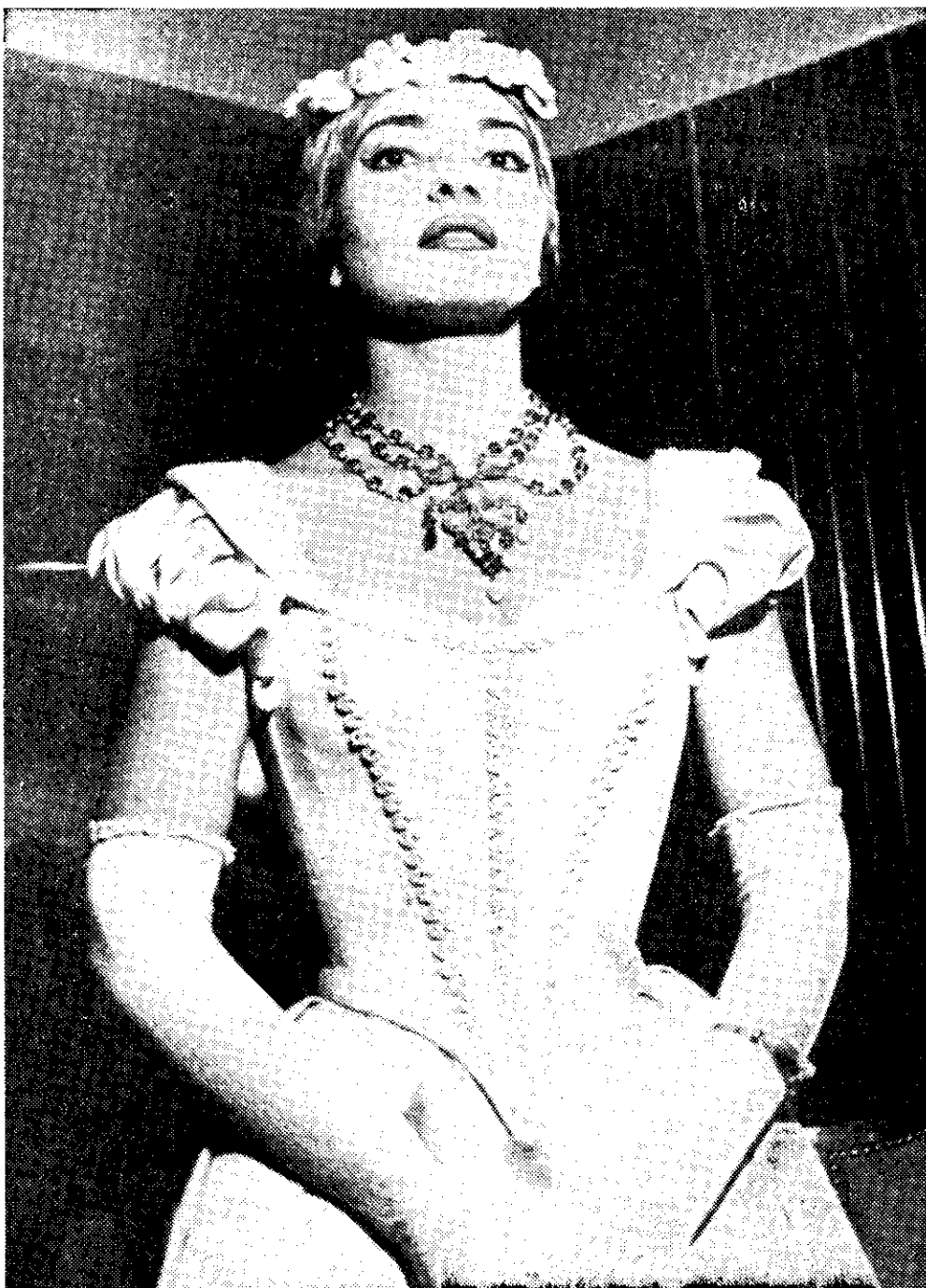
But what about the sensational Callas? She appeared in only one opera, *The Sleepwalker*. And she suddenly flew out of Edinburgh before the last performance of that, alleging reasons of health. Personally, I confess that not even Callas's singing reconciles me to her behaviour in hogging the spotlight and in singing her final "Addio!" nominally to her beloved but actually full face to the audience. Bellini's score itself is pretty music—and I use the weak adjective on purpose.

The Milan company's repertory at Edinburgh was not "intimate" opera as it is sometimes understood, namely, operas which employ only a very few singers and instrumentalists and so can

★ MARIA CALLAS in the title role of Bellini's "La Sonnambula" ★

be staged cheaply. But it was intimate because at its best (from which I exclude *The Sleepwalker*) it showed a subtle, personal, and not merely rhetorical appeal from stage to audience. It also demonstrated, incidentally, how far the Scala has moved (*The Sleepwalker* again excepted) from the old idea that to "produce" an Italian opera you merely tell the singers where the centre of the stage is, and leave them to get on with it. I should add that every one of the prima donnas was reasonably slim and more than reasonably good-looking!

The Piccola Scala has already visited South Africa. That it should visit New Zealand is surely not to be dismissed as impossible. It would provide a needed jolt to those who think of Italian opera companies as mere repositories for the same old tired productions of *La Bohème* and *Rigoletto*.



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