

Tucker and Merrill don't live to reputation

F. N. Crory

On Saturday evening at the Jubilee Auditorium, the Edmonton Opera Association opened its 1974-75 season by presenting Richard Tucker (tenor) and Robert Merrill (baritone) in a joint benefit recital with the idea of erasing the association's existing deficit. The internationally renowned artists, each of whom has been associated with the Metropolitan Opera for upwards of a quarter-century, enticed an adoring near-capacity audience to an evening of operatic arias and duets by Ponchielli, Meyerbeer, Mozart, Puccini, Verdi, Cilea, Giordano, and Bizet.

That Mr. Tucker and Mr. Merrill have reached legendary stature in their own lifetimes is an undisputed fact, and their presence alone was sufficient to promise an evening of vocal pleasure. From this standpoint, the promise was largely - but by no means totally - fulfilled. Both Mr. Tucker, 60, and Mr. Merrill, 57, possess well-preserved voices, considering the span of their professional careers.

It is true that much of the warmth has vanished from Mr. Tucker's voice, leaving in its place a confined and somewhat pinched quality which was particularly noticeable in his strained upper compass. The sustaining power of that compass has shown signs of deterioration; this was most clearly evident in the arias from *Tosca* and *Turandot* which he sang. No longer does Mr. Tucker produce an easy, natural, effortless sound; he labors - at times rather strenuously - after effects. But it must be acknowledged that a laborious Richard Tucker is still preferable to most lyric tenors, labored or not.

Interpretively he displayed considerable restraint through most of the program, although he occasionally indulged (as in Federico's Lament from Cilea's *L'Arlesiana*) in those questionable paroxysms which we have come to associate with the verismo school of musical drama.

As for Mr. Merrill, he produced a strong, smooth, resonant quality in his middle and lower ranges which tended to dominate ensembles, although he tended to rasp periodically in his upper register. Mr. Merrill acknowledged the existence of operas outside of the La Scala-Paris axis by presenting two Mozart arias: "Deh vieni alla finestra" from *Don Giovanni* and "Non piu andrai" from *Le Nozze di Figaro* which created the effect of tokenism, perhaps because they appeared to have received decidedly shoddy preparation, as demonstrated by dynamic exaggeration and rhythmic distortion.

But when all has been said and done, it was not so much the vocal defects which undermined the evening, as the rather disembodied and fragmented dramaturgy which resulted from the impossibility of attempting to capture mood and characterization in a single aria or duet which has been extracted from a full-length opera. In the context of an opera these effects and moods are developed cumulatively by the momentum of the opera itself; a danger which is not - or should not be - encountered in an art song recital in which each

piece is not only self-contained musically, but does not require the aid of props, scenery, costumes, and staging.

On Saturday night there was a certain amount of posturing, but nothing that could be mistaken for stage business. These problems were further compounded by the consecutive procession of thirteen operatic excerpts which tended to neutralize each other dramatically and stylistically. Thus, Mr. Merrill's singing of "Credo in un Dio Crudel" from Verdi's *Otello*, which should be diabolically chilling and which, in the context of the entire opera, should reveal the corruptness of Iago's character, in fact sounded pallid and impersonal.

The ravishing duet, "Au fond du temple saint" from Bizet's *Les Pecheurs de Perles*,

which I cannot hear without comparing to the eloquent recording made by Mr. Merrill and the late Jussi Bjoerling in 1951, sounded notey and pedestrian; it lacked that peculiar sensuality and flow indigenous to the duet.

The lack of atmosphere may, however, have been due to the substitution of piano in a work with which we associate an orchestral accompaniment, and a piano can, at the best of times, be but a poor substitute for an orchestra. Although, during the bulk of the program the substitution of piano for orchestra was acceptable (however uncomfortable), the sacrifice in the Bizet of orchestra to piano was the most apparent and the most disagreeable.

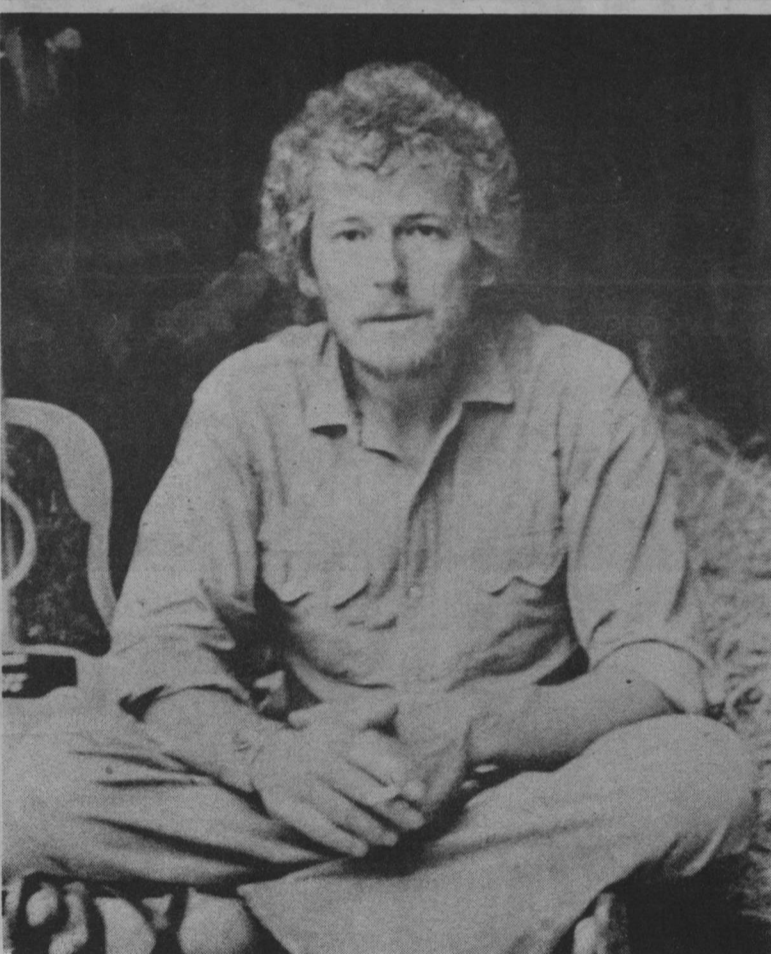
The pianist for the evening was Mr. Erwin Jospé. Balances between voices and piano

favoured the former, making it difficult to assess much of Mr. Jospé's performance; and one could only wish that the piano had been opened to allow greater piano support, especially in such an orchestral capacity. Even taking these obstacles into consideration, however, the impression was that of insecurity which was further underscored by page-turning difficulties. The drafty conditions on the auditorium stage should be well known to the EOA management, and provision should have been made for either a page turner or page holder.

In general the evening created a moderate success. In the area of programming, it offered no surprises, consisting, as it did, of music from the standard operatic repertoire with which, in most cases, the two performers are associated; and

containing nothing - or at least very little - with which a reasonably literate opera buff would not be familiar. Certainly, two performers of such stature as Richard Tucker and Robert Merrill can afford the luxury of occasionally providing their audience with something which is possibly more adventuresome - if not in the program proper, then in the form of an encore.

On Saturday night, however, the first encore took the form of a duet, *Solenne in quest'ora*, from an opera which had already been represented on the program, Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*. For the final encore, which was totally in keeping with Mr. Tucker's observation that Edmonton is "definitely an operatic town", they launched into a medley from that paragon of all operas, *Fiddler on the Roof*.



Canada's folk-institution Gordon Lightfoot will return to the Jubilee Auditorium for two concerts on Tuesday, November 19 and Wednesday, November 20.

'Women's Eye'

by Kirk Lambrecht

Woman's Eye is an anthology of twelve poets writing in British Columbia. The book is edited by Dorothy Livesay, and the poets presented are (in order of presentation): Skvros Bruce, G.V. Downes, Marya Fiamengo, Mazine Gadd, Leona Gom (known to many through *39 Below*), Elizabeth Gourlay, Dorothy Livesay, Pat Lowther, Anne Marriott, Myra McFarlane, Susan Musgrave and Fran Workman.

Ms. Livesay in her introduction claims that the poems present "a way of looking that is distinctly from women's eye; and a way of feeling that is centered in woman's I."

This claim, a strangely nebulous way of characterizing an anthology, begins to thin out by the end of the book. But it doesn't vanish, and this is due to the toughness and skill of the writers presented, especially Dorothy Livesay and Anne Marriott. Only Fran Workman

does not, through her poems, merit inclusion.

The book as anthology suffers from the problem all anthologies must face: the need to adequately represent each writer in a limited space. Each poet in *Women's Eye* gets about eight pages. But the poems are all short, so at least a reasonable number are printed.

Only a handful of the poems are not recent, unpublished work. The most well known of these is probably Anne Marriott's "Battered", a poem dealing with child abuse, printed through *CBC Anthology*.

Woman's Eye is Air's twenty-first book of poetry. Air has previously published the work of 13 poets, including Bill Bissett and Sharon Stevenson. A backlist can be obtained by writing Air/Box 8688/Station Bentall/Vancouver/V7X 1A0. *Woman's Eye* is also available from that address, \$5.00, postage extra.

TV Highlights

Fri. Oct. 18

CTV Friday Night Movie - The Law - A sensational homicide trial sparks bargaining and maneuvering by defense attorneys and prosecutors trying to strengthen their cases in a drama about the inner workings of a large city's criminal courts system. Judd Hirsch and John Beck star. Channel 3

Sat. Oct. 19

CTV Academy Performance - The Candidate - Bill McKay, his party's choice to run for the United States Senate, finds the road hard to travel as he campaigns for the office. Robert Redford, Melvin Douglas and Karen Carlson star. Channel 3

Sun. Oct. 20

Window On The World: The Pacific Rim - This documentary special focuses on the advantages and difficulties of Canadian economic exchange with nations of the Far East, including Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia and China. Harvey Kirck narrates. Channel 3.

Sun. Oct. 20

National Film Board - "The Conquered Dream" 51 mins 30 secs. A documentary history of the exciting, sometimes illfated exploration of Canada's Arctic. Channel 13.

Tues. Oct. 22

QB VII - Part I - Leon Uris' epic novel which is a milestone in television programming. Starring Ben Gazzara, Anthony Hopkins, Leslie Caron, Lee Remick and a host of other big stars. Channel 13.

Tues. Oct. 22

Sing A Good Song - featuring Canadian composer/singer Cliff Edwards and guest stars Winters and Tom Northcott. Channel 13.

Wed. Oct. 23

Cinema: "La Grande Guerre 1914-18" - (Part 2) Historical documentary produced by Solange Peter, with commentators Renaud Mary and Roger Pigaut. (FR/ALL)

Cinema: "Staline" - Staline 1879-1953. His origins, his role at the beginning of the

revolution, his political aspirations after the death of Lenin. (FR) Channel 11

Wed. Oct. 23

First Person Singular. Pearson: The Memoirs of a Prime Minister - Beginning an encore performance of one of the most acclaimed and warmly received series ever shown, a 13-part film autobiography of Canada's beloved, Nobel Prize-winning 14th Prime Minister, the late Lester Bowles Pearson.

Thurs., Oct. 24

Cinema: "Laurel et Hardy: Sous Les Verrous" - Comedy produced by James Parrott, with Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. (USA 31) Channel 11

Les Grands Films: "Les Smattes" - Social drama produced by Jean-Claude Labrecque, with Daniel Pilon, Donald Pilon, Louise Lapare, Marcel Martel and Pierre Dagenais. The government decides to relocate the inhabitants of a small Gaspé village. (CAN 72) Channel 11

Thurs. Oct. 24

The Herb Alpert Special, with special guest stars The Muppets. Channel 13.

Fri. Oct. 25

The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau: Patagonia - Life At The End Of The World - Captain Cousteau and Calypso sail the South Atlantic in the wake of Magellan - in search of what remains of a dying race of primitive people, the independent but doomed Alacaluf Indians, the once free "Nomads of the Sea." Channel 3.

Fri. Oct. 25

The Tommy Banks Show - lively conversation and exciting entertainment with guests of international stature including Bachman Turner Overdrive - rock group and singer Lou Rawles. Musical background provided by The Tommy Banks Orchestra conducted by Harry Pinchen.