

Inspiration catches the Fine Arts Quartet

by J. C. LaDalia

What began as an uninspired evening ended in a blaze of glory when the Fine Arts Quartet performed Wednesday, Feb. 9 in the Edmonton Chamber Music Society series. An American group, they have made their reputation on educational TV, especially in the modern repertoire (Bartok, Hindemith, Karl Husa).

Mozart's last quartet (K. 590) began the program in a somewhat perfunctory reading. The quartet's sound was wiry rather than full, with tempi on the fast side, no repeat taken in the first movement, and a neat but detached quality to their precision. There was little passion in the slow movement, and little wit or spark in the scherzo. Because of the last movement's over-brisk tempo, many passages were smudged.

What a transformation was found in the next work, the Third Quartet of Shostakovich! From the opening bars there was an idiomatic rightness which was riveting, and every phrase connected inevitably to its predecessor. Shostakovich wrote fifteen quartets before his death in 1975, and these are the most significant such works since Bartok's. But only gradually are they being recognized as such in North America, where Shostakovich is regarded more as a symphonist. It was thus particularly satisfying to find the humanistic power of the work clearly revealed in what was the best performance of it I have heard.

The Fine Arts had a richer quality in the second movement, where glissandi and staccato passages were sharply defined. In the March, all was savage and intense. The tragic fourth movement (which turns into a funeral march) was movingly played and with a large, sustained sound. The cellist, who was not notable in the Mozart, was in top form here, his rhapsodic melody beneath viola pizzicatti being almost improvisatory in character. Although it is a long work — some thirty-three minutes — one had the sense of having undergone a considerable experience.

The final work was Dvorak's Piano Quintet, with Menahem Pressler pianist. This is one of the most lovable and exhilarating works in the chamber music repertoire, and the performance was radiant and impassioned. Pressler, who is pianist in the Beaux Arts Trio, is superb at binding together a chamber work by his warmth and attentiveness to the other players. He bobbed and weaved continuously, but to real purpose, catching the eye of each player so he could make his entrance with them perfect. There were some passages in the first movement which lacked the final spontaneity, perhaps because the musicians were getting used to the balance and in one section of the second movement the piano was not quite audible. Otherwise it was a

beautiful performance, intimate in the songful portions, large-scaled in climaxes. The violist, who was in fine form all evening, used a slightly husky tone in the second movement which was especially haunting.

The scherzo was lively and well articulated, and the trio overflowed with vitality and sweetness. Pressler played with poetic clarity and fire, bringing the proper weight to bear at nearly all times.

It was a delightful occasion and the audience was so enthusiastic that the group encored the scherzo.

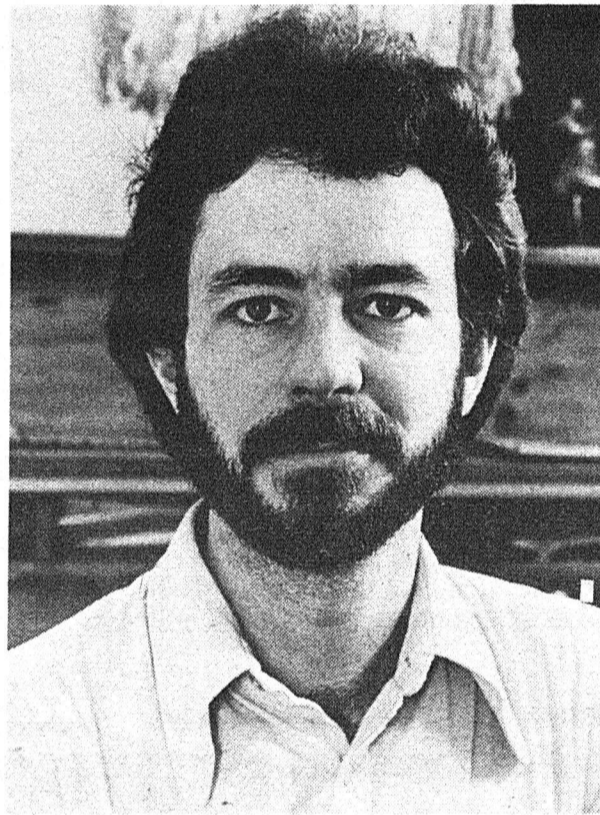
Recordings: The best recordings of the Mozart K. 590 are by the Alban Berg Quartet on Telefunken and

the Quartetto Italiano on Philips. Both include Mozart's penultimate quartet, K. 589.

The Shostakovich Third is available only in a set of his first five quartets by the Borodin Quartet on Seraphim, a budget label (3 LPs). Anyone who really liked the Third would find this a rewarding investment.

The most affectionate and lively accounts of the Dvorak are by Peter Serkin and Marlboro Festival musicians (Vanguard), and Clifford Curzon with the Vienna Philharmonic Qt. (Ace of Diamonds). Both are budget labels. Rubinstein and the Guarneri Qt. have a quite satisfactory reading on RCA as well.

Winchester to appear



Jesse Winchester will be at SUB next week.

Jesse Winchester and his band are to appear next Tuesday night (Feb. 22) at SUB Theatre.

Jesse has had several bands in Canada including a trio consisting of drummer Butch McDade and bassist Jeff Davis, who both today are Amazing Rhythm Aces. They had a huge hit with *Third Rate Romance*, which first appeared on "Learn To Love It," released in 74.

... The next couple of years were consumed pretty much by road work, in Canada, Australia, and Europe... Jesse considers his forte to be "resigned humor", *Damned If You Do* and *Everybody Knows But Me* being prime examples.

He admits to a flair for the unadorned, preferring "very simple chord changes and romantic themes." But it's a deceptive simplicity. His songs detail at a very elemental level the ebb and flow of life. Consequently, he gets weary. But he always winds up smiling.

His career was on its way when a friend introduced him to Robbie Robertson, stalwart Band guitarist himself a Canadian. Robertson quickly took to Winchester's seductive melodies and went on to produce (1970) his auspicious debut LP *Jesse Winchester*. The album contained an inordinate amount of truly contemporary classics, like *Yankee Lady*, *Biloxi*, and *The Brand New Tennessee Waltz*, a tune recorded by Joan Baez and the Everly Brothers. The effect of all this on critics was for them to quite unanimously hail him a major new composer...

Winchester, a former U.S. citizen, opted out of the draft travesty and emigrated to Canada in 1967. It was a fateful decision, one that both blessed and handcuffed him. Working in the U.S. was out (probably for not much longer, if current political indicators hold up). But he figures "if I hadn't moved to Canada, maybe wouldn't be in the music business."

Beauty contrasts vugarity in Salome

J.C. LaDalia

The Edmonton Opera Association's production of Richard Strauss' *Salome* was musically the most solid evening they've offered in some time. Hetu conducted with authority and most of the singing was on a high level. The great flaw was the staging.

Mr. Guttman may well be valuable as Artistic Director and driving force of the EOA, but a stage director he isn't. His two major short-comings are that he has few ideas about conveying important stage action, and what ideas he does have are usually vulgar.

The first problem was before us when the curtain rose. Narraboth and the Page are on the terrace. But in what are they engaged? They are waiting, but this was not suggested. *Nothing* was suggested. They just stood and sang. There is much waiting in this opera. As is frequently said, "something terrible is going to happen," and the music seethes with tension and dread. But to no purpose. Nor was the Page's love for Narraboth conveyed. Nor Herod's unhealthy watching of Salome. The relationships were not shown.

Salome enters for a purpose: she's getting away from Herod's raucous banquet longing for fresh air. In this production she appeared because it was time to start singing. Similarly, Herod should appear in anxious pursuit of Salome, not shuffling along on cue. Unlikely as it may seem, even in operas characters come and go and perform acts for reasons, and this can be conveyed to an audience.

Other major omissions include Narraboth's suicide five feet behind Salome, rather than between her and John. The point is that neither she nor the prophet really see the event because they are locked into their obsessions. Why should she notice when it occurs behind her? Further, Guttman has already correctly depicted John as a self-hypnotised ranter who sustains a gesture for minutes on end, and is as obsessed with Herodias' sins and Christ's coming as Salome is with him: Why is he then shown to be concerned with such an incident?

Lighting might have been imaginatively used in the scene where Herod feels a great wind blowing. Strauss provides vivid music for this moment, which is a portent of doom. But on stage no one even listened to Herod: extras were sauntering in, chatting together. We could hear how he felt, but the stage remained blandly static. If you didn't know the text, nothing suggested the event.

A more significant lighting failure was the moon's disappearance during Salome's final monologue. Again Strauss has written eerie music describing clouds covering the moon, yet the act occurred too soon and the music went for naught. And neither the clouds nor the removal of the torches affected the lighting, which remained at the wattage of a conscientious parking-lot. The atmosphere of this opera is crucial, constantly evoked in the music, and must be somehow suggested on the stage. An audience is better off spending its fifteen dollars on a recording and imagining the scenes, than observing such a half-hearted enactment.

The relentless vulgarity of Salome's characterization was the most serious offense. Salome is an innocent 16-year-old with a proclivity for funny ideas. She develops an obsession with John and pursues it unswervingly. But she is not a teen-age slut. When she implores Narraboth to let John out of the cistern, she should not paw him. She is a princess, and he is a guard, who worships her in her chaste aloofness. Her glances, her bearing, her alluring melodic line undo Narraboth, not his being felt up.

The scene with John was alternately shoddy and absurd. Strauss warned directors that the erotic hysteria is clear enough in the orchestra; it should not be reinacted on the stage. Salome should barely touch John. Instead Salome behaved like a commercial for French ticklers, even writhing on the floor in front of him, and we witnessed the absurdity of John politely waiting for Salome to stop singing before repulsing her. The reason Narraboth is able to kill himself between them (as explicitly stated) is because they're not in a clinch. A further absurdity was the moment when John

says "Get back!" while Salome is sitting several feet away, her back to him. Much more could be detailed but the above suggests the approach.

A final complaint: no matter what the opera Guttman has extras in the background chatting, drinking and living their own little lives. Perhaps he never got over his first *Pagliacci* (or was it *Stage Door Canteen*?) but whatever the source it is inappropriate in many operas and nowhere more than here. Scenes such as Herod frantically offering Salome jewels rather than John's head were trivialized by the business-as-usual manner of slaves pouring wine, guests quietly commenting. And when Herod offers her the veil of the temple, the extras did not leave horrorstruck, but trooped out as if the show had been cancelled.

If I have dwelt at length on staging sins it is because this is the great problem the EOA currently faces. Real stage directors must be hired or further efforts are pointless. Financially they are in the black, musically the evening was impressive, with solid, frequently beautiful playing from our orchestra, respectable if not thrilling singing from the principals, save for Victor Braun as John, who was spectacular. Hetu, Alexander Munn, Albert Krywolt and other musicians make dependable contributions to EOA productions. The sets and costumes are variable, but in this production were appropriate and sensible.

But this is not enough. Good as the musical aspects were such productions can't compare with first-rate recordings, unless we see the drama alive before us. Opera fans are the most passionately devoted group imaginable because they come to see the arts amalgamated in a uniquely exciting way. It's the magic of the visual spectacle and soaring voices, bigger than life emotional states (love! death! retribution!). We can sometimes accept great actors with wobbly voices, or great singing without much characterization. But if the stage is a vast blandness we have only a travesty of opera, and the audience will form opinions about opera without realizing they have never really experienced it.