

Superb orchestra complements solists

by J.C. LaDalia

The Edmonton Symphony's concerts this past weekend consisted of a mixed bag of works. Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro for Strings* opened the program. This glorious bravura piece for string quartet and string orchestra is fully within the reach of our orchestra now, and their playing was full-toned and admirable.

But Hetu's too-suave conducting smoothed out those contrasts of mood in the music which make it seem a much larger work than it actually is. Thus the exhilarating opening uprush of more than an octave (between the first two notes of the work) was ignored, and we were given the two notes neatly separated instead. And the haunting 'Welsh tune' which comprises the work's fourth theme was played matter-of-factly instead of with the 'dolce' wistfulness which makes its presence so special each time. The extreme speed at which Hetu took the fugue, "a very devil of a fugue," as Elgar said, was successfully negotiated by the orchestra but it robbed the music

of much of its expressiveness, making it sound academically clever instead. This was a pity since the players were capable of performing the most tender and radiant reading possible.

The evening's solist was the American contralto Lili Chookasian, who sang the five *Wesendonck Songs* of Richard Wagner. These songs are most effective when sung by a mezzo or contralto whose voice possesses an operatic amplitude combined with the sensibility of a lieder singer. Miss Chookasian certainly has the former but one was not infrequently aware of a too-wide vibrato combined with a tendency to flatness.

The third song, *Im Treibhaus* ("In the Greenhouse"), was not sustained in line. The songs were generally sung in a straightforward open manner which was pleasant but not as insightful as can be imagined. These are gorgeous songs, two of which are studies for *Tristan und Isolde*, and have an intimacy and inwardness (especially the third and fifth) which make a rapt, ecstatic performance filled with longing the most satisfactory.

Miss Chookasian did not

seem at home with the necessary mode. The orchestra was superb however. Indeed, the last song throughout was one of the most quietly intense passages I have ever heard them deliver. Brass and woodwinds were hauntingly atmospheric at all times and at the powerful climax to the second song, *Stehe still!* ("Stand Still!"), managed a rich, burnished tone combined with dead-on accuracy.

Miss Chookasian is best known as an opera singer (I saw her perform the title role in Menotti's schlocky but entertaining *The Medium* several years ago with great gusto and authority), and she seemed more in her element after the intermission when she performed two opera arias. These were *Che faro senza Euridice*, from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, and *Stride la Vampa*, from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. The first was sung well enough but lacked that special insight which reveals it as an infinitely moving lament rather than a sad, pretty tune. The second aria found our singer in best form, with excitingly gutsy low notes that were fairly boomed out. However, out of context,

Azucena's narrative becomes just a mezzo showpiece rather than a moment of revealed characterization, and the melody sounds catchy in a shallow way rather than darkly splendid as it does within Verdi's feverish little masterpiece.

The evening's final work was Bizet's *Symphony in C Major* which Bizet wrote in a month just after his seventeenth birthday. The performance was superb. In the opening movement each section dovetailed seamlessly into the next. In the Adagio, a sinuous nightpiece, the woodwinds were wonderfully liquid and languid. Hetu's tempi were well-gauged, even the breakneck pace of the fourth movement, which maintained a bubbling musicality that never became hectic (as in the Elgar). It was a thoroughly balanced performance and the audience relished it, bringing the conductor back for three curtain calls on Saturday.

Recordings: Lili Chookasian has made infrequent recordings. She is the mezzo on Leinsdorf's unidomatic reading of the Verdi *Requiem* (RCA, 2 LPs). She sings the lone mezzo solo in

Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky*. Thomas Schippers' recording with the N.Y. Phil. (Odyssey budget label, 1 LP). Her extended recording is of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with Richard Lewis, tenor, and mandy conducting Philadelphia Orch. Unfortunately it is currently available only as part of a 3-LP set which includes the Cooke reconstruction of Mahler's Tenth in a performance which cannot be recommended.

There are several excellent recordings of the Elgar, depending upon what other works one cares to acquire with it.

Barbirolli (on Angel) gives a generous, radiant account of the *Allegri* Qrt. and the *Lento Sinfonietta*. This includes Elgar's *Serenade for Strings* and works by Vaughan Williams, similar (though less interesting) reading is given by Sir Adrian Boult (also on Angel), coupled with Paul Tortelier's luminous account of the Elgar, *Cello Concerto*. Smaller-scaled but beautifully detailed versions by Sir Benjamin Britten and the English Chamber Orch. (on London), and Neville Marriner and the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Field (Argo). Both of these incisive performances of English string music, Marriner boasts the loveliest version of Elgar's *Serenade*.

The *Wesendonck Songs* were gorgeously sung by Christine Ludwig on Angel, and with greater inwardness by Jessye Norman on Philips. Dame Janet Baker has just recorded her interpretation which will probably be the most searching of all, but will not likely be as opulent in tone as the two named above. Both of whom include Wagner's *Prelude* and *Liebsteod* from *Tristan und Isolde*. The conductors are, respectively, Claudio Klemperer and Colin Davis.

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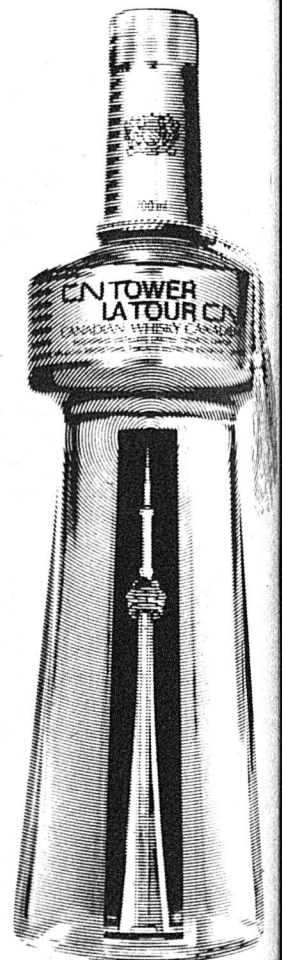
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