

PENELOPE OPERA BOWS IN SALZBURG

Liebermann Work Is Based on
Ulysses Legend—Christl
Goltz Sings Title Role

By HENRY PLEASANTS

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SALZBURG, Austria, Aug. 17—If intelligence and ingenuity were all that were required to compose an effective opera, then Rolf Liebermann's "Penelope," which had its premiere here last night, might well be considered a successful effort.

However, since inspiration rather than intelligence is the primary requisite, this conspicuously uninspired "Penelope" is unlikely to enjoy greater success than that of other recent operas whose intelligence quotient may have been inferior.

It is impossible to listen to "Penelope" and to read the commentaries provided by the Swiss composer and his librettist, Heinrich Strobel, without sensing that both men have been more concerned with avoiding the mistakes of others than with risking original mistakes of their own. Thus, in order to avoid anti-quarianism in the treatment of a Greek theme, and to make their opera topical, they have put the Penelope-Ulysses legend in modern dress and given it a new twist by having Penelope marry before Ulysses' return.

Projected into Future

However, in order to mitigate the possibly embarrassing immediacy of the topic, the authors remove both themselves and the audience from the consequent tragedy by having the Penelope of the Greek legend present it as a projection into the future as a sort of extension of her ingenious tapestry. Nor is this the end of defensive devices. In order to enliven a dreary tale, comic relief is provided by three of Penelope's suitors in commedia appears at the end to offer an edifying sermon to the effect that fate is imponderable in any case, and that only the artist's fantasy makes life tolerable.

Similar devices characterize the score. The most frequent criticism of modern operas is that they give singers nothing to sing. Mr. Liebermann gives them a good deal. But, since he is a modern composer, what he gives them is usually a twelve-tone row. Even here, however, he is on the defensive. Since it is the lack of a tonal foundation which so disturbs the layman in listening to twelve-tone music, Mr. Liebermann employs his twelve tones within easily recognizable tonalities. The result is something about as close to the modern twelve-tone technique as "Tristan and Isolde," and "considerably less tuneful.

Souped-Up Modal Harmony

The stylistic experimentation goes further than that. For the Greek scenes there are choruses in souped-up modal harmony. For the modern scenes there is even a sequence of boogie-woogie. For a minor coloratura character there is an aria a la Zerbinetta, and for the comic characters there are borrowings from the grotesques of Stravinsky and Prokofiev.

This, in other words, not so much an original score as a series of gimmicks intelligently conceived and skillfully executed, in both book and score—an attempt to provide something for everyone, ending in an opera with nothing much for anybody. No one is offended, but neither is any one much pleased.

In avoiding the known pitfalls, the authors have provided no virtues of their own. The opera will be disparaged by the moderns for its compromises and by the conservatives for its modernity. It would be easy to say that Mr. Liebermann is a Jack-of-all-styles and master of none. The fact is that he is master of a good many. This is true of other modern composers. What defeats them, as it defeats Mr. Liebermann, is the absence of a real modern style of their own, with a vocabulary and syntax intelligible to both composers and lay listeners—in short, a music of their own time.

The new opera had a superb production by Oscar Fritz Schuh and Caspar Neher. It was excellently conducted by George Szell and dominated by the stunning Penelope of Christl Goltz. It was received with the polite applause now customary on such occasions.

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