

MUSIC: TWO VIEWS OF 'BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE' BY BARTOK

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Bartok's only opera, "Duke Bluebeard's Castle," is as simple in outline as a fairy tale but as rich in domestic complications as a daytime television serial. A duke takes a wife whose way of expressing her love is to insist on opening up all the doors to his past. "Was I the first one?" she coyly asks Bluebeard. As any soapopera viewer knows, that kind of feminine inquisitiveness invariably ends in trouble. And so it does for Judith, the insatiably curious wife in Bartok's musical treatment of the Bluebeard legend. Though it has been produced by the New York City Opera and occasionally turns up in a concert version, this dark and ultimately mysterious work seems destined to stand just outside the doorway of the standard operatic repertory, too important to be ignored and yet too peculiar in its appeal to be invited inside. This week, however, brought us a rare opportunity to reassess the opera, in two distinctly different concert productions performed in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Hungarian composer's birth.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's performance on Monday night at Carnegie Hall gave every prospect of being the more authentic and more idiomatic. It was conducted by Antal Dorati, a Hungarian whose Bartokian credentials are in good order (he led the first performance of the Viola Concerto). The solo vocal roles were also entrusted to Hungarian artists: the soprano Katalin Kasza and the bass Kolos Kovats. The performance, sung in Hungarian, included the spoken prologue in Chester Kallman's English translation. Incongruously, the narration reminded one of Joel Grey's master-of-ceremonies in "Cabaret," a bit too jaunty and mocking to be the introduction to so foreboding a piece of dream work.

The New York Philharmonic, on Wednesday night, dispensed with the prologue, offered a Czech conductor in Rafael Kubelik and non-Hungarian vocal soloists: Tatiana Troyanos, a New York mezzosoprano, and Siegmund Nimsgern, a German baritone. The Philharmonic performance also was sung in Hungarian, but all in all it would be difficult to find two more divergent approaches to this work than those taken by Mr. Dorati and Mr. Kubelik.

Mr. Dorati placed his singers side by side, where the differences between Miss Kasza's bright, steely soprano and Mr. Kovats's black bass were emphasized. Mr. Kubelik, with a mezzo and a baritone, set them apart, on either side of the podium, so that the narrower difference in range and vocal color did not result in clotted textures, as you might expect. From behind forbidden doors emerged unearthly moans, as stipulated in the libretto, but there were no other attempts to suggest operatic staging.

The Hungarian singers, close in space, might have been in separate compartments. They looked straight ahead at all times, like the King and Queen of spades, possibly in an effort to sustain the legendary "once upon a time" mood and prevent the action from degenerating into a hectoring, soap-operatic confrontation. The effect, however, was emotionally sterile, partly owing to the blandness of Mr. Kovats, who vocalized his role superbly but did not really sing it. Mr. Dorati beat stiffly through the score, letting it blow off steam at times but rarely raising the dramatic temperature to the level that the text demanded. There are interludes of gentleness and pastoral beauty in the score that Mr. Dorati chose to ignore or treat prosaically.

One serious problem facing interpreters of this work is built into Bartok's score. The prevailing atmosphere from start to finish is gloomy and cold. Nevertheless, Mr. Kubelik and the Philharmonic musicians managed to find enough variety of timbre and dynamics to carry the listener along. An experienced operatic conductor, he knew how to build minor climax after minor climax without dissipating the excitement. Miss Troyanos, though spatially isolated from her duke, spent the night trying to make eye contact with him. No use. Mr. Nimsgern remained a study in solitary sadness and male confusion in the face of woman's demands for emotional oneness. Both Philharmonic singers were more affecting than their Detroit counterparts.

A major annoyance of both performances was the lack of a line-by-line text and translation, which would have permitted a great many more listeners to explore the opera's male-female nuances as well as its deeper symbolic subtleties. There must have been more than a few people at each performance to whom Hungarian was Greek.

The Detroit "Bluebeard" was prefaced by a glassy-toned reading of Bartok's Piano Concerto No. 3, with the authoritative Bartokian Gyorgy Sandor as soloist. Mr. Sandor

gave the first performance of this work in 1946, presumably on a piano that was in tune. The Philharmonic's preliminary offering was Bartok's "Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta," which Mr. Kubelik gave a propulsive and convincing performance. His Furtwanglerian way of indicating attacks with his elbows and forearms rather than the tip of the baton makes him less than the ideal Bartok conductor, but the musicians seemed to know what he meant and did it with remarkable precision.