

MARC BLITZSTEIN (1905-1964)

Marc Blitzstein was in residence at Bennington College in 1962-63 as teacher, playwright and composer on a Golden Fellowship. It is highly fitting that one of his students of that year, Reed Wolcott, should have taken the initiative in organizing this evening's concert in his memory. Bennington College warmly welcomes this opportunity to pay homage to Marc Blitzstein.

Thomas Brockway, Acting President

On April 19, a group of the late Marc Blitzstein's friends and admirers paid him the tribute of gathering to perform a program devoted entirely to excerpts from his works. This concert was performed at Philharmonic Hall of Lincoln Center and included selections from Regina and The Cradle Will Rock as well as three songs from work in progress including "How I Met My New Grandfather" from Idiots First and "Then" from The Magic Barrel and "With a Woman To Be" from Sacco and Vanzetti. The Magic Barrel and Idiots First are two short operas based on the stories by Bernard Malamud upon which Mr. Blitzstein was working at the time of his death. Sacco and Vanzetti is an opera commissioned by the Ford Foundation in conjunction with the Metropolitan Opera Company.

The following statements are taken from the program of this concert.

#### AARON COPLAND

Marc Blitzstein once described himself as "addicted to the theatre." But he was much more than a theatre composer in the Broadway sense. He was an intellectual - complicated and difficult at times - and a greatly gifted musician. A piano prodigy in his teens, he also composed remarkably well at an early age. After studies with Scalero at the Curtiss Institute in Philadelphia and later with Boulanger and Schonberg in Europe, he was well on the way to being a leader of his generation as a concert composer.

Gradually, for reasons best known to himself, he turned his attention to that most resistant of all musical media - the musical stage. His purpose was not merely to write the words and music of effective theatre pieces; he wanted to shape each piece for his own ends, to shape it for HUMAN ends. He took a certain pleasure in needling his audiences, in telling unpleasant truths straight to their faces. To sing these truths only gave them greater poignancy. The moral fervor that fired his work in the depression-haunted thirties resulted in the writing of The Cradle Will Rock. The opening night of The Cradle made history; none of us who were there will ever forget it.

His later operas, No For an Answer and Regina were musically more ambitious, with a broader dramatic range. They gave full play to his brilliant gift for musical characterization. He could be sarcastic, parodistic and even derisive at times; but he could also be gentle, tender and tragic. Most important of all, he was the first American

composer to invent a vernacular musical idiom that sounded convincing when heard from the lips of the man-in-the-street. The taxi driver, the panhandler, the corner druggist were given voice for the first time in the context of serious musical drama. This is no small accomplishment, for without it no truly indigenous opera is conceivable. Blitzstein would have been the first to acknowledge his debt to Brecht and Weill, but the fact remains that he gave their theatre an American imprint, an American 'tone'.

Blitzstein's life exemplified a truism that needs to be re-emphasized today, namely that "an artist has the right to make his art out of an emotion that moves him". Those of our composers who are attracted by new technique would do well to consider that humanity's struggle for a fuller life may be equally valid as a moving force in the future of our music. It was the motivation for Marc Blitzstein's art, and resulted in a contribution to American music that is yet to be fully evaluated.

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#### MINNA LEDERMAN

I shall always remember Marc Blitzstein as the fortunate young man of thirty. Before he reached that age he was at war with himself - a restless intellectual, a stern moralist and, in temperament, a most prickly pear, insulting and arrogant one minute, penitent and devoted the next. Then, overnight, in the heat of inspired creation, all of Marc was transmuted, his conflicts resolved, his erratic gifts compounded one-hundred-fold. Anger became massive wrath, sly malice expanded to large-scale social satire. There are indeed many delights in The Cradle and not the least is the joyous song one hears of an artist's release and self-discovery.

Everything intrigued Marc, he loved facts, including the minutiae of how the other half lives, i.e. in the world of luxury. Good food for instance, though he was on special diets so much of the time, or fine wood panelling, or how to grow hybrid rhododendrons. For himself he had a stark routine which, in the context of his general views, I found touching and suitable. The small apartment in the Village he and Eva shared during their brief years of marriage was white and beautiful and very bare. And the single study-room on Twelfth Street that he rented after the War and kept to the end, with its old furniture, had the shabby charm of a turn-of-the-century literary man's digs.

Marc was intensely loyal to principles and people, which is, for an artist, quite unstylish. His consistency of faith did perhaps impose a kind of strait jacket on his growth. But he was aware of this rigidity. In recent years he was tormented with the problem of expanding his powers and his idiom without compromising the basic credo of a grand simplicity. Anyone who enjoyed Marc's friendship, however, had every reason for gratitude, gratitude that at the core of this complex and extraordinary gifted being one could hear so recognizably human a heart beat... Right now I think I shall miss most the invigorating sensation of Marc entering a room, his slight figure eager and combative, prepared for battle, and ready to give and take all.

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#### LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Reminiscences are at best difficult; precision of recall always suffers at the hands of subjectivity. Worse still is the unfortunate human tendency to lump our images of people together into labelled categories. This has never been more obvious to me than in these months after Marc Blitzstein's death. In "remembering" him with others who knew and admired him, I have found myself shocked more than once by the easy way in which people had consigned him to the file marked Urban, Radical, Bohemian, Angry, whatever. This is sheer laziness of mind. To whatever degree these appellations were true, they do everything but describe the man I knew. My most vivid images of Marc are all connected with nature; by the sea, in the woods, in a boat, in the sun, in the snow. Marc swam as devotedly as he composed, and with equal discipline. He rose with the sun, swam before his Spartan breakfast, was continually escaping from New York.

My earliest memory of him is in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he had come to see my production of The Cradle at Harvard in 1939. I met his plane in East Boston (it was still rather daring to fly then) and I was amazed at the slowness of this man I had imagined, through his music, to be a giant. He attended our dress rehearsal that morning; and then we walked, all afternoon, by the Charles River. Now that image leaps up in my mind: Marc lying on the banks of the Charles, talking, talking, bequeathing to me his knowledge, insight, warmth, endlessly, with endless strength drawn, like Antaeus, from his contact with the earth. And so he continued to be whenever he touched earth, sea, woods, snow. It was a child of nature who had written those notes that seduced my soul, those thousands of special, mysterious notes that can never be forgotten.

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