

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

Edited by Colin Mason

© 1964 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 51-36700

TELEVISION OPERA

The BBC's laudably experimental intention in commissioning six new 60-minute operas for television is clearly revealed in their choice of composers—Carl Davis, Thomas Eastwood and Christopher Whelen. The collaboration of the *Z-Cars* script-writer John Hopkins as Whelen's librettist also suggests interesting possibilities, and the BBC seems to be after works with something rather different from the traditional operatic relationship of music to text and action.

The one immutable characteristic and touchstone that enables us, faced with all the new and experimental combinations of music and drama that have been tried in this century, to distinguish between true 'opera' or 'music drama' and mere 'drama with music', is the supremacy of the music at all times. And if there have not yet been any successful television operas (successful in the artistic, not the commercial sense) it is not so much because of the special difficulties of the medium as because composers have either not aimed or not reached musically high enough.

The one possible exception is Stravinsky's *The Flood* (discussed by Anthony Payne in the following pages), which does not claim to be opera, being called on the title-page 'A Musical Play'. This work is too new yet for any confident statements to be made about its having provided an answer at last to the problem of television opera, for it has been seen so far in only one television production, which was not received with unmixed praise. But significantly it has already been taken up by opera-houses proper, supporting the proposition that in the matter of the basic relationship between music and action there is no essential difference between the demands of television and those of the live musical theatre—although television may have special requirements in the matter of subjects.

It is possible that the BBC's commissions will produce some good and popular dramatic entertainments of wide appeal, with music that manages to be decent without interfering with non-musical viewer's enjoyment of the 'story'. Less probably, a genuine and first-class opera may be born of one of them. But whatever the outcome, those concerned with opera on television should be on their guard against getting sidetracked into regarding opera as a branch of drama rather than a branch of music, or into trying to water down opera into some other kind of musical-dramatic entertainment. The aim of a television opera department should not be the impossible one of winning the television masses (the *Z-Cars* or *Coronation Street* public) to opera, but that of winning the opera public to television opera. And that should be the aim in the creation of new works for the medium no less than in the adaptation of the classics.