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JAN 31 1956 DEC 2 1955

## A CENTER FOR THE ARTS IN PERFORMANCE

The very rumors that New York, or rather America, or indeed the whole world, might shortly benefit from the chances of a proper center for the performing arts, has set off more hopes and fears in the realm of music, theatre, and the dance than at any time since the founding of the Metropolitan Opera. So much to be hoped for, so little expected; so many sad precedents of starts and stops. But whatever the future, our present atmosphere is different in kind from the climate in which earlier projects have been projected to founder in the friction of individuals and organizations, none of which could hope to establish such a dream alone, yet none of whom were ultimately willing to sacrifice an increasingly expensive and unrealistic autonomy. Today, there is nobody in authority who has not great good will for the grand project as a whole, -- not ready to surrender artistic or historic autonomy, but eager to be members of a federation. For New York City has urgent needs to be filled. The imminent destruction of Carnegie Hall, the long story of the inadequacies of the Metropolitan Opera House are more than pressing pretexts. New York City has its local musical services to maintain and improve; the rest of the nation can only benefit by what usually first happens to its prime port; the whole world increasingly turns to us for signals of important spiritual fulfillment comparable to our eminence, in useful technics and finance.

In discussing, or sketching a new Center of the Performing Arts, it is impossible to separate the practical from the ideal. Since the ideal is at once the most attractive, the most expensive, as well as the cheapest (in the long run), it is unwise to ignore it, no matter what real-estate specialists may tell us. They have been worn down by limitations in the everyday business of management. However, if we let the restrictions of our present miserable improvisation and inadequacy, however ingeniously overcome, determine future chances, we surrender absolute quality to dubious expediency, at the very outset.

What are the entire desires, superimposed on the minimal needs, for a great center, planned as one might plan with freedom a great new medical or military establishment?

That is, presupposing the end function of musical and theatrical performance was a vital necessity? Either the arts in performance deserve and can command action on such a supposition, or they cannot; if they can't, further discussion is useless. If they can, then let us acknowledge the fact of their special necessities. The arts of performance are custodians of magnificent repertories of vocal and instrumental literature, of dance and of spoken drama. They require virtuosi performers and powerful esprit de corps, - the traditions of a West Point or Annapolis grafted onto the conservatories of the Comedie Francaise or the Russian State music and ballet schools, inhabiting a plant in every way equivalent of the New York Medical Center or the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

New York has the finest opera in the New World, a leading orchestra, great ballet companies, and at least the potential of classic dramatic repertory groups, which in the years to come seem sure to grow into something approaching institutional rather than speculative theatre. None are ideally housed. Both the Metropolitan auditorium and Carnegie Hall have glamorous links with the past, but neither their proprietors nor their public can any longer afford to support their inconveniences or wasteful operative costs. Much is lost in the destruction of any historical monument, but there are monuments which are unique masterpieces, and others, which, after all, are only more or less flattering frames for the far more important masterworks of music that is their function to present. There is a great deal more to be gained if they can be replaced by frames of splendor and suitability by our present builders. Modern architects are seldom given the chance to erect honorific structures in which function is not shelter alone but magnificence also. There is enough rudimentary skeletal beauty in many recent structures, such as the Secretariat of the United Nations, the Alcoa Building in Pittsburgh, the Johnson Wax Factory, to indicate that imaginative richness can luxuriously enhance materials and basic use. It is still practical to build a palace. A palace is no mere ostentation of waste space, but rather the authoritative promenade of space, from exterior lobbies and staircases to shimmering auditoria and magic-making stages, orchestrated towards splendor, parading the action of people at their peak of performance. Lavish lobbies and reckless staircases, grand arcades opening on greenery punctuated by

fountains and carved stone, opulent approaches and wide perspectives are the adornments of honor that arts in performance require to be fully appreciated in their historic and psychological climate. Are we, who are so complacently generous with airplane-carriers and guided missiles, too poor to provide for handicraft which has no use but glory?

Let us assume we are not - for the sake of the dream. Let us presuppose splendor as the prime function of such a Center, because there is even the chance that it may come true, for the best of empirical reasons : necessity. Necessity alone has not forced the desire to find new houses for opera and orchestra, but it has to a healthy degree broken down the barriers of rigid isolation which has sometimes seemed in the public eye to treat these artistic stewards more as social clubs than as public service agencies. No one would ask either opera or orchestra to surrender aesthetic autonomy : it is, for example, naive to imagine that a great independant orchestra could ever serve a great independant opera company, maintaining at the same time full schedules for both. But there is some chance of physical collaboration, of new audiences shared, of close proximity of aim and site that has never seemed possible before.

Granted opera and orchestra need new homes; that means a minimum construction of a large opera-house and a concert-hall big enough to replace Carnegie Hall. But will the new concert-hall be a simple music-shell, or will it provide an equipped stage? When the British built the new Festival Hall on the Thames Southbank, specialists excluded a proscenium-stage which they were shortly forced to improvise within the perfect acoustic shell, to the detriment of all events subsequently staged there. And in a true center of the performing arts, which we feel we deserve, - is there no place for the spoken word, for the revivals of classic drama, ancient or modern? Hence, a third hall, smaller than the other two must serve as home for drama. With a fair-sized orchestra pit, it could house popular seasons of operetta, of which we have a considerable and growing contemporary repertory. It could be very useful to the management of the great opera-house for the proper scale of production required by Gluck, Mozart, or Rossini, as well as the whole realm of novelties which cost too much for large production, and which are rarely comfortable in big halls.

Three such houses make a lot of seats to fill. There are fifty-two weeks in a year, and one hundred and fifty-six units of pooled time shared by three theatres. It is conceivable that a central source of labor and materials might serve such a center, with interchangeable staffs and artists, storage-space and practice facilities. However many the seats, minimum needs at once total up quite a lot of weeks of work. If the Met can use some twenty-five weeks for its present season, plus rehearsal time and the possibility of a junior season, some forty-plus are taken. There are also foreign aggregations to be invited to these shores for limited engagements. We have long enjoyed the Sadler's Wells biennial visits; next year we will greet the Royal Danish Ballet, but the Kabuki Theatre, the Soviet Ballet, the Vienna Opera and many others have never been able to be invited here for lack of a proper frame. The recent visit of the Comedie Francaise has proven that even a foreign language is no barrier; the wordless tours of our native great symphonic and ballet organizations have been potent ambassadors.

If our orchestra needs for its own season some twenty weeks, visitors from Boston, Philadelphia, Minneapolis and the rest are still to be served, and there are the necessary debuts or annual appearances of a variety of musicians and choral groups. The commercial possibilities inherent in the support of artists from the recording industry and television increases rather than diminishes the need for personal appearances and live performance. If the new Music Hall to-be had an equipped stage, the ballet companies, who could also use twenty weeks or more would not be exiled to the early Fall or late Spring.

As for the third, or smallest house (assuming 4000, 3000 and 1200 as possible capacities), it would be one in which the spoken voice could be heard without mechanical amplification. If we are ever to have a permanent National Theatre, we certainly need a national home in which it could be host or tenant, and Washington D.C. has not the audience for it. When we invite the Old Vic, or the Comedie Francaise, the theatres we now find for them on Broadway, where they must accomodate their own polished productions to improvised presentation, are less than ideal.

In whatever order they get themselves built, it seems that we need, at the least, three houses: Opera, Music Hall, Drama House. MusicHall can double for Dance; Drama can

double for operetta and small opera. Is it too much to ask for a still smaller hall, for chamber-music, small choral groups and other soloists and ensembles? Any mad thought of three free-standing structures breathing in a green park is something that the richest city of the richest nation in the world cannot consider. The least we can do is to provide the few acres for the most urgent of our requirements, with the greatest imagination.

The scheduling of one hundred and fifty-six annual week-units, keeping the participating agencies happy, will be no easier than any other large problem of industrial engineering. But consider the construction and operation of the Pentagon, Oak Ridge or the U.N. enclave. Dealing with artists only adds another dimension; dealing with the entrenched boards of famous institutions is easier when the idea of entrenchment has become obsolete. Some authority will doubtless come into being, even a Performing Arts Incorporated, which will be responsible for the maintenance of order and the quality of performances. It is no insuperable problem. The very fact of the physical existence of a decent, or superior working-place would certainly provide an atmosphere where collaboration, the sole system that succeeds in theatre, could be a joyful norm.

A center of the performing arts depends upon performers, and performers depend upon their training. Opera-singers, ballet-dancers; ideally, actors, are virtuosi only a little short of acrobats. They can presuppose their technique only after long training has become inherent to their daily performance. Would it not be sensible if supporting schools found a home close to such a Center. Association by proximity, if not by direct alliance could serve existing schools, and the eventual theatres. These schools now make their own way. Some are endowed. In every European country with a tradition of music and theatre, there is the subsistent tradition of schooling and discipline. A child aspirant knows stage hazard and company responsibility not as something imposed by accident, but ingrained from first appearance. One of the disadvantages of the semi-cloistered atmosphere of such a great training complex as the Juilliard School and the nearby Music Department of Columbia University is its distance from our centers of practical music-making. The excellent work by our two vocational high-schools in the city public-school system has been severely limited by lack of proper space. And there is never enough individual studio-practice space in New York, where young unattached artists can differ from and enrich

present practice by personal experiment.

Which of all this servicing is too much to expect, too costly to budget? Which is simply too luxurious to consider? If we were planning a new hospital, a center for an undeveloped branch of electronic or atomic science, or indeed only a national Air Force Academy (for such a Center, in the best sense, is for the nation too) - would we grudge them library, museum, or exhibition space? The Music Division of the New York Public Library, the Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have fantastic collections of instruments, documents, manuscripts and pictures which are shown only occasionally and then in part. If there is little space left over could we not build, at least a single unit, high in the air? If the Lincoln Square acreage is, strictly considered, limited, might not contiguous areas be developed later?

All of this is only a recapitulation of familiar hopes. But now possibility is inflammatory, and the greatest combination of tact and patience, dispatch and perseverance must be exercised to hold to the ideal of a true center of all the arts in performance - arts which are as closely interrelated as biology, chemistry and physics, and which demand a similar energy in research and expansion, and a similar support from the great public and informed stewards of public and private funds. This is no place to outline possible or probable financing, nor to adumbrate the position of federal or municipal governments. One cannot solve the intricate human problems in particular nor the musical life of the capital of the world in one simple synthesis. The question of a second local orchestra (such as the Symphony of the Air) of a second opera company (such as the New York City Opera), of the American National Theatre and Academy, and many others, remain to be considered. Certainly, lines must be drawn and more plans than one have previously failed for trying to include too much from the start. There is no place in such a center for any agencies already well taken care of, nor for the generalized vocational education on an unspecialized level. This would be a center for the arts in performance, for the performers and their public.

And beyond the question of establishment and construction there is the problem of maintenance. No one believes in subsidy, or if they believe in the principle, no city or central government will seriously face the fact. It must be up to the public to support

the finished Center, to maintain it in the style to which it must accustom itself. Not for rich America is the annual grant of a million pounds to Covent Garden for opera and ballet, nor of a million and a quarter to the Comedie Francaise. No bond issues are over-subscribed as in Vienna for a new opera. But the Metropolitan and the Philharmonic have always had their desperately loyal friends, and they have survived whatever the cost. The ballet has never had a larger public nor been more active.

And then, if the ideal is held to - the drawing-power of the monumental aspects of such a Center, includes the performance of the art of architecture as symbolic focus and magnet of inestimable dimensions. New York has long lacked a focal facade. To be sure we have the glory of our haphazard sky-line and the formal perpendicular blocks of Rockefeller Center. Its little plaza, like the shy but tidy open area of Lever House tease us with what could be done. Still, the facade of the Place de l'Opera is still the queen-symbol of music in performance. The palace that Charles Garnier offered all the arts in its planned reckless opulence shows what the arts can give back for such an honoring. Let all the craft and cunning of builder, painter, sculptor, combine to show an incredulous world that America actually credits the uses of the intangible, without prize - the ephemeral performance in eternal masterpieces, made by the most enduring artists everywhere.

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