

## BLITZSTEIN'S ANSWER

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MARC BLITZSTEIN's *No For An Answer*, is in the truest sense an opera, with only a little more music than the Greek Tragedies must have had and only a little less than Wagner's. I mention Wagner in preference to Weber or Mozart – or others whose work has more affinity with *No For An Answer* – because Wagner and Blitzstein have one very important and often overlooked advantage in common: the unity of composer, dramatist, and poet. Like all centralizations of power, this unity has pitfalls. It may prevent the artist from seeing a dislocation apparent to others, it may be too lenient to long-windedness, it necessarily deprives the artist of collaborative criticism. But the advantages outweigh the dangers. The three-in-one method gives enormous concentration of mood and purpose, most notable with both Wagner and Blitzstein in the big moments. The words, the music, and the dramatic action achieve an intensity of fusion possible only where all three have had the same origins in the same brain.

*No For An Answer* is not the perfect entity, the acute and small masterpiece that *The Cradle Will Rock* was. It is a much more ambitious work – often touching, frequently funny, sometimes profound. It continues the proof that Blitzstein is one of our foremost satirists, outstripping the Thurbers and Nashes and Arnos because his means are as deft and light as theirs and his bitterness more valid. The best Broadway song of the year – a Torch Song to end all Torch Songs – is in *No For An Answer*; and so is *Penny Candy*. But Blitzstein has been sparing of the "hit songs" – songs which trip up the plot, the mass movement, no matter how felicitous they are. And it is just this effort not to concede and this concentration on the mass that give the work its power and meaning. The individual, solo expressions have a simple line and a concise, elliptic lyricism; but it is in the choruses that the creative fusion takes place most intensely. The polyphony and occasional antiphony here are continuously expert and expressive and personal. In these choruses, Blitzstein has found himself, not only

musically, in the idiom of notes, but – I should gather – emotionally as well. And this comes from the plot and his identification with it.

*No For An Answer* is concerned with a group of unemployed waiters, Greeks, who are done in – have their meeting place burned and their leader killed – by the skullduggeries of the armed forces of so-called Law and Order. The play ends with the affirmation of this Greek Chorus to continue the struggle. It is the only affirmation in the play – all the rest, like the title, being primarily a negation.

Ordinarily, it is no one's business what a composer's politics are; but here Blitzstein has built an opera on his beliefs and shown it to us. No criticism of so integral, so honest, so explicit a work can avoid examining the core and validity of the composer's intention. No one in his senses can question the truth of his allegation. Share-croppers, silicosis in the Tri-State, Negro hospitalization, poll-taxes – the list of injustices and follies and inadequacies is endless. But it doesn't take a Ukase nor a nineteenth century German Abacus to answer them here. The fact that Blitzstein knows of the horror, writes of it, and can produce his work is in itself one of the answers. I admit that one reason he writes so well is that he probably thinks he has the total answer. In that, he resembles Fra Angelico, who could not conceive of work except for the "Cause." But economic mysticism is just as wide of the mark as Lady Bountifulism. And I think there is an unconscious recognition of this in the drawing of the character of the aloof rich girl who throws in her lot with the Greeks as a counterpoise to the character of the rich young man who boggles at the eye of the needle. As I say, no one in his senses (which is an extremely limiting bracket) disagrees with, or is unaware of, Mr. Blitzstein's thesis. He himself and his aristocratic work are among the answers to his own charges. And I, personally, think they are better answers than the one Blitzstein has and which he did *not* put in his play, thereby leaving it a picture, an identification of himself with a group (with all the power and comfort that that gives, as all Churches have discovered), a sublimation but still a picture.

If Robespierre's dogmatic frock coat is faintly evident in Blitzstein's wardrobe, the music is entirely undogmatic and flexible. It not only revolves, it progresses. Mere revolution is no advance. The music, while not denying a family tree, is spontaneous and American – in just the right American vein which is so conspicuously out of Mr. Kurt Weill's range, for example. It uses, sparingly but authentically, any jazz rhythms it needs,

tosses a Gilbert and Sullivan patter over its shoulder, and rises to the real power of its choruses in a natural and vigorous way.

I suspect Blitzstein thinks *No For An Answer* can be put on all over the country by work-groups. I'm very much afraid that this is a pipe-dream. The work is elaborate artistically, as difficult as a Schubert song vocally, as in need of highly trained technicians as any opera. And it is pleasant to record that on the whole it received this expert treatment at Mecca Temple. The choruses were particularly well trained, the acting was frequently of a high order, and the direction clean and forceful. Olive Deering, Carol Channing, Lloyd Gough, Curt Conway and Victor Wolfson deserve especial praise. Mr. Blitzstein's esoteric virtuosity at the piano is not news.

What is news is that this is an important work, a big work. It is engrossing, exciting and moving.