

ORPHEUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

By MARTIN S. DWORKIN

UNDER the web of pavements at Times Square in New York City, with its raucous noises and neon visions, is a maze of tunnels and passageways — a subterranean world whose thoroughfares are always crowded with people hurrying to and from the many subway lines crossing and converging on levels cut still deeper in Manhattan's rock. Stores, lunch counters, flower stands, barbershops and other businesses cater to the unending traffic. One theatre on the Square even has a box-office downstairs in a garish arcade; it used to be possible to leave the subway and go to the movies without going outdoors.

The underground box-office isn't used now, but nearby is a bizarrely-active installation of pinball machines, girlie peep-shows, take-it-yourself photo booths, mechanized games of chance and dubious games of skill. This carnival midway is presided over by hard-eyed men wearing aprons in whose capacious pockets jingle vast quantities of change. Without their coins, the machines lie dormant. The colored lights of the pinball machines are at rest; the battle-noises of the target-shooting devices are silent; the wax gypsy in the fortune-telling machine is motionless, forever smiling over her fabrications of the future.

But this coin-operated world is rarely still. People are always hurrying by; some stop to linger at this machine or that. A few minutes to kill, a few loose coins, and all the gimcrack pleasures come to fitful life. And, of course there is music to be bought. A huge juke box stands between a snapshot booth and a machine for stamping names on strips of metal. A dime for two plays. For most of the day and much of the night, the juke box is alive, responding to the coins like all the devices of the place. But of all the machines, this one has worshippers, rather than players.

Most of them are young. Some wear ordinary street clothes, look as if they had been passing by after work or college classes. They are usually reserved, raptly listening to the records, often appearing utterly bemused, their attention far off somewhere within their own feelings. Once in a while, one of them thoughtfully will pick through a handful of change from his pockets, looking for a dime or two to keep the machine going. After depositing the coin, he will stand before the bank of titles, almost like a child at a candy counter, confronted by a fabulous array of wondrous confections, unable to choose the one that will fulfill the anticipation evoked by all.

But there is another, less transient group, much like those around juke boxes everywhere. They wear nondescript jackets, affect long, shaggy coiffures, use their bodies in their speech like primitive dancers. Their reaction to the music is more apparent, more vocal, punctuated by shrugs and gestures and erratic movements expressing inner turmoil with an eloquence unmatched in their talk. The latter is in the language of the faithful who meet at juke box altars in beer joints and soda parlors: the ever-changing jargon of those who must insist they belong while others do not — now it is the “hipster” talk of wonderful, “crazy” renditions, of “flipping” to the music, of other, disdained pleasures that are just “nowhere.”

They could be listening to the lacrimations of Johnnie Ray, or the endocrine expressions of Eddie Fisher — or any other crooners, male or female, who provide vicarious articulation for emotional incoherence. But the juke box stands under a sign announcing, “A Treasury of Immortal Performances,” the trade-marked slogan of a brand of classical recordings. And the music is out of Italian opera, sung and played by the gaudiest names of the genre: Caruso, Tagliavini, Albanese, Bjoerling, Peerce, Toscanini.

The heart of the surface city pulsates above, the subways rumble their steely gutturals below. But here Jussi Bjoerling’s clear lyric tenor sounds the *Siciliana* from *Cavalleria Rusticana* — followed, perhaps, by the ecstatic despair of Licia Albanese’s *Un bel di vedremo*, from *Madama Butterfly*, or her ardent *Addio del passato*, from *La Traviata*. All the selections are of the lush melodic type favored on “gala” programs — even the orchestral works, which feature Toscanini’s readings of the overture to Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*, and Von Suppé’s venerable veteran of bandstand concerts, *The Poet and Peasant Overture*. Only his recording of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute Overture* suggests a bridge to less obviously emotional areas of “classical” music.

There are rare moments when the music may be heard without the clash of other sounds: the ringing bells of various pinball machines; the staccato drumming of the target-shooting devices; the whistles, sirens, and whiz-bang noises of the various games; the shouts of the players and nearby vendors of hot frankfurters and newspapers. But the hipster-aesthetes around the juke box are unconcerned. Their ears apparently can select the sounds they wish to hear from the chaos of noises. The operatic virtuosi hold their audience here much as the crooners and jazz instrumentalists must do among the constant aural

and visual distractions of the crowded night clubs where they perform — or the smoky saloons or clattering eating places where they are heard on records.

Nor does serious opera seem out of place for the dedicated who gather here. It is unlikely that many of them have ever seen an opera, in an opera house. They belong to a vast public that knows "opera" only as a succession of passionate, melodic arias, recorded by idolized tenors and divas. These may be played in any order or juxtaposition, without ever placing them in the context of an organic scene, much less a whole production.

Some of the group — perhaps more of those who are the reserved transients — may go on to know serious music under more musical circumstances. Why they wait here at all may only be surmised. Perhaps it is to enjoy a community, however fleeting, of those their own age who are unembarrassed by such preferences. The location of the juke box, in the midst of cheapjack carnival, may lend respectability to their tastes. One is hardly likely to be accused of being "highbrow" in a pin-ball arcade.

The others, responding as they would to the passing favorites of popular entertainment, seem unaware that this music may be different. They seem unconcerned about questions of whether their tastes are being elevated, or whether it is rather that good music is being vulgarized, here where the matter of popularized culture appears in most grotesque simplicity.

The mechanism of the juke box hums and moves, responding to the coins. The voice of Jan Peerce rises from its electronic throat, singing the perennial *Vesti la giubba*, from *I Pagliacci*. The group stirs. Some of the young men are visibly moved. One starts to sneer at Peerce; for him, the movie-amplified Mario Lanza is "the boss." The others shush him into silence. They listen reverently, their eyes on the floor, or somewhere out beyond the walls of this odd temple underground. Some of the last part of the record is almost inaudible, as a group of sailors boisterously begin working one of the nearby simulated anti-aircraft ranges, shooting down the painted targets with photoelectric beams, amid an artificial cacophony of battle.