

MUNICH

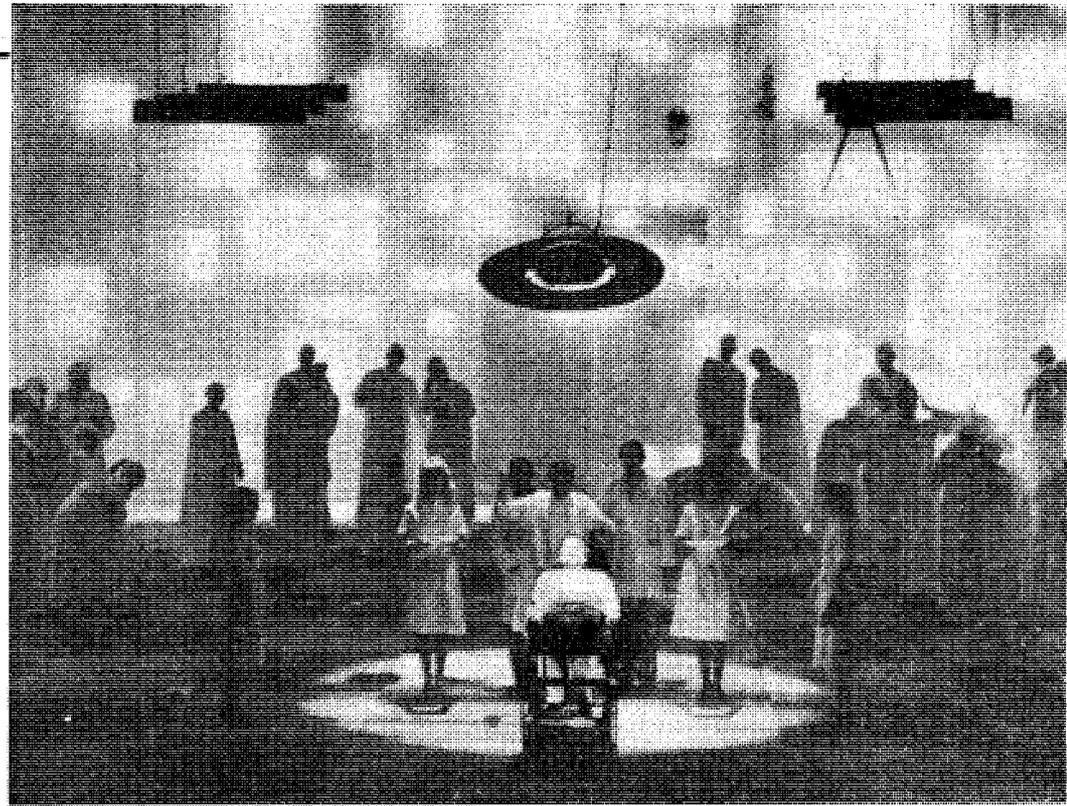
'Temptation'
—Josef Tal's
New Opera

By David Stevens

MUNICH (IHT).—The Munich Festival's staple diet of Strauss, Mozart and Wagner was spiced this year with a new work commissioned by the Bavarian State Opera from the 66-year-old German-born, Berlin-trained Israeli composer, Josef Tal—known in the West primarily through his "Ashmedai," which had its premiere five years ago in Hamburg.

The Munich work, "Die Versuchung" (The Temptation), is a parable of the misuse of power and the pitfalls of creating idealized images. In the original libretto of Israel Elikaz, the stylized story involves a group of six disillusioned young people from different social backgrounds who seek to escape from civilization into the mountains. They find footprints in the snow and, following them, find a man totally innocent of civilization whom they decide to educate in "human ideals" and make their leader.

Their instruction takes the



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The hospital scene from Götz Friedrich's staging of Tal opera in Munich.

form of simplified lessons on the nature of religion, love, power and money, and after they return to urban life with their all-too-apt pupil and messiah, these lessons are played back in their corrupt forms. The chosen leader becomes a grotesque dictator, religion is regurgitated in fake faith healings, love becomes hate, money buys power and power corrupts totally. The original group of disciples is destroyed in one way or another until the work arrives back at its starting point.

This succession of events is presented in a highly schematic way, not unlike one of Brecht's didactic exercises, complete with chapter headings and explanatory messages flashed in lights above the stage opening. The only thing that is not explained is why the original group of seekers after truth and peace did not simply ignore the footprints in the snow in the first place.

Staging

The premiere enjoyed a lively success at the National Theater thanks largely to the elaborate and highly controlled staging devised by Götz Friedrich, which, with the brilliantly impersonal, white-on-black sets and costumes of Andreas Reinhardt, took over the main job of communication from Tal's finely crafted but detached score.

The composer uses the resources of a large orchestra, with

electronic attachments, in a sparing and laconic way. Often a scene is characterized by a single family of instruments, underpinning the text in a delicately percussive style, but only occasionally giving it a lyrical impulse.

The main share of the lyricism fell to Catherine Gayer, as the unnamed woman among the six social dropouts, whose silvery high soprano and physical seductiveness were effective in introducing the innocent savage to the ways of love (or, at least, sex) and poignant in a Faustian madhouse scene.

Wolfgang Schöne's resonant baritone was given considerably

less musical scope in the role of the leader of the group of six—a character named, with heavy symbolism, Johannes Kolumbus. Thomas Thomaschke, in the bass role of the Man, cut a Christ-like figure with Hitlerian tendencies—and Hitlerian success at making middle-class morality work for him.

The large cast, chorus and Munich Philharmonic were under the committed and sensitive direction of Gary Bertini, the Israeli conductor who—aside from his earnest advocacy of Tal's works—has proven himself an opera conductor of formidable gifts in a wide repertory.

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A Günther Rennert retrospective made up a full two-thirds of the Munich Opera Festival (July 10—Aug. 2). Rennert chose to ring down the curtain on his own ten-year tenure as Bavarian State Opera Intendant with the appropriately insouciant "Tutto nel mondo è burla" finale of Verdi's *Falstaff*. Highlights this year included the first complete new Munich *Ring* and a *Nozze di Figaro* for the memory book, featuring Karl Böhm, Gundula Janowitz, Brigitte Fassbaender, Reri Grist, Hermann Prey and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. And with her *Rosenkavalier* Marschallin on July 15, Claire Watson took leave of the opera stage after eighteen years as one of the company's finest, most popular artists.

The Festival came up with only one brand-new production this summer, a world premiere especially commissioned for the occasion—*Die Versuchung* (The Temptation) by Josef Tal, presented on July 26. Librettist Israel Eliraz's story at first glance seems deceptively simple. Six young dropouts searching for the key to a better life stumble on a sort of noble savage in the mountains and try to fashion him into a vehicle for their

own visions, first giving him a crash course on the rules of the modern game, with lessons on money, God, power and love. But when they bring him back to town he promptly becomes a monstrous tyrant, who ultimately destroys the group itself before moving on. Hard to say what it's all supposed to mean, and the cryptic narrative has its share of logical short circuits. But Tal has achieved his goal of seamless coordination between music and stage, expertly applying everything from *Verfremdung* of a Bach chorale to jazz sax and the occasional electronic touch. The result: a lot of pointed musical illustration, but no really absorbing sense of cumulative musical development.

Director Götz Friedrich, eschewing any rigid framework for the enigmatic tale, tried only to make it scenically fascinating. This he did—in the subtle interaction of the group members, in the disciplined anarchy of the brutal mob scenes, above all in the sinister choreography of the chess match acted out (with urban guerillas as pawns) as a lesson in the realities of power politics. Andreas Reinhardt's stage designs, particularly for the mountain scenes, admirably combined imagination with economy, evoking a great variety of atmosphere by the simple play of light on translucent plastic hangings.

The one girl in the group has the only voice part that is less than benign, but the occasional challenging vocal somersaults presented no problems for Catherine Gayer. She, her young companions (Wolfgang Schöne, Willi Brokmeier, Claes H. Ahnsjö, Horst Hoffmann and Hans Wilbrink) and Thomas Thomaschke as the noble savage—equally at ease as child of nature and greedy despot—all contributed to the evening's undoubted success. So did conductor Gary Bertini, who ably read the signposts for the Munich Philharmonic.

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