

French Opera Back — In Effective Staging

By Louis Snyder

After one season of silence, the Friends of French Opera returned last night to Carnegie Hall to present a semi-staged performance of Massenet's "Werther," a piece also conspicuous by its absence, under the direction of Robert Lawrence.

A formidable cast had been assembled—Nicolai Gedda in the title role, Rita Gorr as Charlotte, Theodor Uppman as Albert, Anne Elgar as Sophie, and Joseph Fair, Charles May and Daniel Ferro as other Goethe creations, and a group of boy choristers from Corpus Christi Church sang the children's choruses. The effective skeletal staging, without use of props, and with simple screens and levels, was by Carlton Gauld.

While "Werther" is not of a genre to excite Italian opera lovers, since it is music depicting inner feeling rather than broad, strong emotion, Massenet's work, nevertheless, gives a strong cue to the special quality that makes French opera so endearing once one has been initiated. Roof-raising may not be its purpose, but there are occasions when the score, abetted by a lusty, authoritative, performance, can achieve this effect.

Last night Nicolai Gedda as Werther, was an ideal exponent of the kind of lyric singing that separates the French from the Italian product. There was restraint, without diminution, in all he did, and "Pourquoi me reveiller?", the tenor's piece-de-resistance, was the vocal



Robert Lawrence, conductor, Friends of French Opera.

triumph of the evening. Miss Gorr, naturally enough, lent warmth and experience to her portrayal of Charlotte. However, as the evening went on, and the stress of the role mounted, her forcing resulted in pitch problems which made the "Letter Scene" something less than one would expect of her.

In the ingenue role of Sophie, Miss Elgar sang impeccably, and Mr. Uppman did all that was possible with the uncomfortable role of the unloved husband. The trio of townsmen—Messrs. Fair, May and Ferro—made the most of their expositional roles, and Mr. Lawrence, without fanfare, and with a fine ear for nuance, kept singers and orchestra happily balanced.