

MASSENET OPERA IS REVIVED HERE

'Werther' Is Given Its First Performance Since 1948

Praise be to Robert Lawrence and the Friends of French Opera!

At Carnegie Hall last night, they gave New York the first performance of Massenet's "Werther" that it has heard in 17 years. The 73-year-old opera was revived here by the New York City Opera in 1948, but it has been neglected since then, as it had been for decades before that time.

In Paris they do things better. According to Herbert Weinstock, the author of the program notes of last night, the work has been given more than 1,300 performances there and still averages 20 annually at the Opéra-Comique.

For this revival in a semi-staged concert version, Mr. Lawrence and the organization of which he is artistic director and conductor assembled a cast of quality.

Gedda Sings Werther

Nicolai Gedda sang the title role, Rita Gorr was Charlotte, Theodor Uppman was Albert, and Anne Elgar was Sophie. Smaller parts were taken by Joseph Fair, Charles May and Daniel Ferro, and boys from the choir of Corpus Christi Church were on hand to sing the Christmas carols that figure in the beginning and the end of the opera.

The French Opera Orchestra was placed at one side of the stage, and the singers, dressed in evening clothes, moved about an arrangement of low platforms as they indicated the dramatic action of the opera.

"Werther" is based on a novel by Goethe that tells of a poet's hopeless love for the wife of another man. At the end, the poet commits suicide.

This may not be a story that moves us deeply nowadays, but the music in which Massenet clothed it is irresistible. It is also highly theatrical and, believe it or not, dramatically powerful. The orchestra does not just accompany the singers; it makes statements of its own and plays a strong part in relating the significant musical themes of the work to each other.

Mr. Lawrence's pacing of the opera was exemplary, and, given the stage separation of the forces under his command, he maintained generally good balances between voices and orchestra.

Mr. Gedda made Werther an almost heroic vocal personality, belting out the poet's anguish at times in near-Wagnerian volume. Miss Gorr's interpretation was rather more subtly drawn and therefore more touching. Miss Elgar was charming as the younger sister Sophie, and Mr. Uppman was effective as the devoted husband.

Since the large audience contained many persons prominent in the management and performance of opera, it is to be hoped that this performance of "Werther" might encourage others. It seems likely that those who heard it last night would gladly pay to hear and see more. ALLEN HUGHES.