

# The Uncut 'Tristan' Concert With a Life of Its Own

By RAYMOND ERICSON

The telephone kept ringing in Eve Queler's upper West Side apartment on Wednesday morning, but she made others answer it. "I don't think I can face any more crises at the moment," she told a visitor. She was referring to the fact that the two leading singers in the concert performance of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," which she was scheduled to conduct in Carnegie Hall on Sunday night had had to withdraw because of illness.

She was partly resigned to their loss — "This is the time of the year when you expect singers to get sick," she said — and partly unhappy. The two singers, Jess Thomas and Roberta Knie, had been in the performance Miss Queler conducted at the University of Maryland last summer, and Sunday's had been planned as a repetition of that much-praised performance.

"We thought about canceling the concert," the conductor said, "but when I asked around, people seemed extremely set on hearing it. They had made their plans for this special event on New Year's Eve ahead of time, and they were reluctant to change them. So we decided to go on with the performance, just hoping we could get good replacements for Thomas and Miss Knie. Tristans and Isolde are not easy to find these days, but we were able to contact Herbert Becker and Berit Lindholm in Europe — both experienced Wagnerian artists — and they agreed to come."

However, the most important reason behind Miss Queler's agreement to present this "Tristan" under any cir-

cumstances lies in the events that led up to it. They go back to the beginning of 1978 and reflect something of a drama in themselves.

Last winter the University of Maryland in College Park decided to establish an opera-training orchestra as part of its Summer Institute for the Creative and Performing Arts. The project was set up as a separate entity, known as the National Opera Orchestra Workshop, and Miss Queler was invited to be its music director because of the years she had spent conducting her own Opera Orchestra of New York.

The project was dear to her heart. Instrumentalists in this country, she can testify, want to become players in symphony orchestras. They look down on opera orchestras because they have to perform unseen in theater pits, they usually have to play a fixed and narrow repertory, and in many early Italian operas they are reduced to playing what they consider dull and unimportant passages of "oom-pah-pahs."

"Those 'oom-pah-pahs' are not dull and unimportant," she said. "Only someone who doesn't know anything about opera would think so. Most symphony musicians come to an opera with no idea of the story, of what the singers are singing about, and they don't realize how some of the simplest musical ideas were used by composers for specific purposes. Those ideas have to be played with attention to the composer's purposes."

In any case, Miss Queler went around the country last spring recruiting youthful musicians for the workshop. Some were attracted to the four-week session by the need for a more rounded experience in any repertory, some by

the operas to be prepared ("Don Giovanni," "Rigoletto," "Tosca," "Cavalleria Rusticana," "Tristan"). Miss Queler gathered together some 80 players, ranging in age from late teens to early 30's, who were technically expert.

At Maryland last summer she immediately put her student ensemble through rigorous rehearsals lasting six hours daily. Not used to this kind of discipline, the young people found that it took a week to adjust to it. After that, they enjoyed it. They were given room and board by the university in one dormitory, which brought them together socially and musically.

Like most instrumentalists, they spent their spare time playing chamber music, practicing or getting individual instruction from the professional coaches — people such as Raymond Gniewek, concertmaster of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra; Jascha Silberstein, the Met's principal cellist, and the three de Pasquale brothers, who are important members of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

"I've been to many summer music camps and congresses for string players," James Greer, a 21-year-old violist from Detroit, said, "but I've never found a group as unified in intention and as friendly as this one." Donna M. Forster, an oboist from Santa Cruz, Calif., who has had experience in opera orchestras, agreed that she had learned more in this training project than in any other. She had been induced to come because of the prospect of playing "Tristan."

Each of the operas worked on was given a free public concert performance, with singers from the College

Park area and with the University of Maryland chorus. They culminated in the "Tristan," with Mr. Thomas and Miss Knie, which one Washington critic described as "Tristan" in all its glory... This was an astonishing affair in every way and Eve Queler and the University of Maryland are entitled to unlimited praise for their vision and its achievement."

This success led to the feeling that the performance should be repeated in New York. It was timed for the holidays, because that was when the members of the orchestra could come together again. They are doing so at their own expense. Some are being put up by friends of the project.

Almost all the players are from out of town and will be performing in Carnegie Hall for the first time, which, as Mr. Greer said, was a "thrill" in itself. Although a party is set following the performance, many in the orchestra have expressed a wish to see Times Square at midnight on New Year's Eve.

As before, this "Tristan" will be given uncut. It will begin at 5 P.M. and will end around 10:30. There will be two one-hour intermissions. Besides Mr. Becker and Miss Lindholm in the title roles, the cast will include Marianna Busching as Brangäne, Richard Clark as Kurvenal, Louis Lebherz as King Marke, and Curtis Rayam in the several other smaller roles. Messrs. Clark, Lebherz and Rayam took part in the Maryland performance, and Miss Busching was an understudy.

Tickets are \$6 for the rear balcony; \$8, front balcony; \$10, dress circle; \$12.50, second tier; \$17.50, parquet and first tier. They are available at the box office (information: 586-4453).