

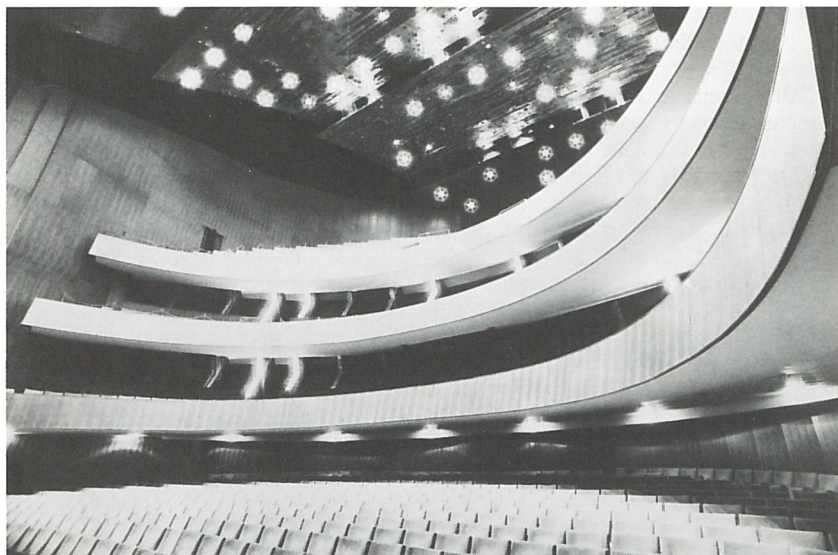
no singers will perform if the productions aren't right or the management is too commercial. The Grand Théâtre is open all year round — and plays to an average of 94 per cent capacity (1,488 seats).

Not surprisingly, there is an interesting tale to tell.

The city and canton of Geneva, which presides over one of the richest *per capita* income groups in the world, according to recent research (highest *disposable* income anywhere), returns a generous subsidy to its opera house. Income amounts to £7 million per annum, including box office receipts. One wonders how many Genevans are actually reached . . . well the answer is, a surprising 10 per cent. And despite an understandably heavy reliance upon subscription sales (a regular mailing list of 6,000), which accounts for the great majority of ticket sales, a deliberate policy has been pursued of keeping allocations available, at special prices, for the casual or occasional opera-goer. There are also "popular performances", at low prices, for special social or work groups of the public.

With the reliance on subscriptions, which at least gets the money into the bank, you might expect the consequent "freedom" to encourage mounting of experimental productions. After all, financial constraints are what force companies to "play safe" half the time. But no. Careful assessment of Geneva audiences' taste shows that they prefer the classics, so although this spring will see Britten's *Mort à Venise* (Death in Venice), in co-production with Scottish Opera, normal choices are Bellini, Strauss's *Salome*, Offenbach's *La Périchole* and so on, to look down the current season's programme, and also Handel's *Julius Caesar* (a co-production with English National Opera), directed by Charles Mackerras, designed by John Copley, scenery and costumes by John Pascoe and Michael Stennett respectively; and Tchaikovsky's rarely-performed *The Queen of Spades* (not in the repertory of any of Western Europe's major houses, and the New York Met last performed it in 1965). Sometimes a "classic" is bought off-the-peg, like their *Marriage of Figaro* in February and March: Peter Hall and John Bury's collaboration and even some English singers. But more often, the management prefers to find its own novelties, which frequently happens through scenic innovation. This emphasis can threaten to dwarf the musical proceedings, as with their recent *Queen of Spades*, where the opulence and technical display became distracting. But from the visual point of view . . .

Productions run for an average of six to eight performances only. Thereafter they die, never to be re-performed. The fact is, with such a small opera audience, they estimate they have reached their natural limit — before people start coming for the second time round! And since the greater part of their audience is "abonné" (on subscription) anyway, they daren't bring productions back into the rep within "recent memory" unless it is say, a Verdi or Mozart warhorse. Storage costs would be prohibitive to keep them longer. So, with



The sweeping new balconies of the Grand Théâtre auditorium.



Exterior of "Le Grand Théâtre de Genève". Flagpoles on either side of the main doors often carry the red and yellow flag of the Republic and Canton of Geneva. It is spotlit at night, from across the square it faces.

approximately ten new productions a year, things work out expensive. Owing to fairly generous rehearsal periods (which take place in the former League of Nations premises by the side of Lake Geneva, looking across to Mont Blanc), the first night curtain rises on pretty smooth productions. It has also avoided the temptation to become an "aviary" for "canary fanciers", drawing its audiences by billing (usually unrehearsed) star singers, as Covent Garden once used to do. Nor do visiting stars treat Geneva lightly, as can happen in smaller opera houses — guesting for a few performances. In the bad old days of the late 'fifties, during the Met's Rudolph Bing era, there were, for instance, eight different Amonasros for only 11 performances of *Aida*! Here, *The Times*, *International Herald Tribune* and other papers review productions for their international merit — or indeed, their rarity value; since the search for more "classics" turns up frequent novelties.

The opera does not tour, but the resident ballet company does. "It is our calling card", says François Duhaïne, *Secrétaire Générale*, who spoke to your correspondent in his office, while the orchestra rehearsed downstairs in the pit. "There are also visits from Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century and other companies during the year, not to mention various concert performances by leading singers and musicians" he added. Two of the new productions are ballet works, and like the operas, they have the services of the Orchestra de la Suisse Romande — even when on tour.

The orchestra is made up of two groups of 60 musicians, one playing in the pit at the Grand Théâtre, and the other playing for the radio or television stations (Radio Suisse Romande, etc.), who also pay their salaries. It's a bruising schedule for the musicians, but it ensures that the orchestra is no mere "pit orchestra". Ernest Ansermet, the OSR's first conductor and progenitor, put the orchestra on the map