

# Gorky's Search

**T**he New York School of Painting. The phrase is basic to our view of American culture, yet it was coined only about 35 years ago. Until the end of World War II, there had been a School of Paris and not much else. Paris was the center, the capital of modernism to which the aesthetic provinces exiled their most audacious citizens. Then, when Paris fell in 1940, there was a



Gorky's Matisse-like self portrait, ca. 1928-31.

vacuum in the politics of culture. Munich, Dresden, Barcelona, Milan—all these and more had challenged School of Paris modernism at some point in the previous half-century, but of course none then had energy to spare for the effort. That New York, the new world's leading city, rose to cultural ascendancy after the war seems inevitable now. America was ascendant in every sphere outside the Soviet hegemony. Yet the fall of Paris was not enough

to create the New York School. There had to be artists ready and able to create it—there had to be Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko. And, as a major retrospective traveling from New York's Guggenheim Museum to Dallas and Los Angeles makes clear, the contribution of **Arshile Gorky** was essential.

The appearance of the New York School looks sudden, a revolution. Of course it was something very different—the result of a complex, by now unrecoverable evolutionary process. Gorky's art is interesting because it gives a sense of that process, of that slow but nonetheless inspired development from old world to new, from Paris to New York. And Gorky's art is major because, at the end of his life (he died in 1948), he broke entirely free of Europe to a style, a landscape of feelings completely his own.

The terrain of his earliest memory was not European at all, but Near-Eastern. Arshile Gorky is the pseudonym of Vosdanik Adoian, born in the Turkish Armenian village of Khorkum in 1904. Turkey's persecution of its Armenian minority was constant and it steadily intensified. In 1920, Gorky and his sister emigrated to the United States, as a number of their relatives had already done. Their father had settled in Rhode Island. A step-sister lived in Massachusetts. Gorky found work, mostly in Massachusetts factories, where he annoyed his employers with his constant drawing.

It's standard in artists' biographies to claim that they drew pictures before they could talk, yet it seems to be nearly

true in Gorky's case. From a very early age, he made pencil drawings and wood carvings. As soon as he was settled in Massachusetts, he began attending classes at Boston's New School of Design. In 1924, only 20 years old, his desire to be a painter drew him to New York where he made his home for the rest of his life. He tried a number of art schools there. Finding none satisfactory, he embarked on an astonishing process of self-education.

Over the next 15 years or so, Gorky would assimilate School of Paris modernism. He might have begun with the Impressionists, and there is an important clue to his development to be noted in the fact that he did not. The Impressionists are devoted to the luminous surface—a play of light that sometimes leaves rock as fluid as rippled water. Gorky's first master was a Post-Impressionist, Cézanne, whose heavy greens and grays seem to be working through the surface of objects to their structures. Cézanne is primarily a draftsman, a painter whose images are built from an architecture of line. Gorky learned that architecture by heart.

From the beginning, Gorky's strength was his ability to give linear clarity to form. He found his aesthetic freedom in the Forties, when those forms became, at last, his own, but as a young artist still in his twenties he had a long way to go. Gorky's immersion in the styles of his masters was so complete, his paintings seem almost recapitulations of their art. After Cézanne came Braque and Picasso, then the Surrealists—Miró, in particular. Léger, Matisse, even his fellow New Yorker Willem de Kooning were all important. The way was as difficult as it was long, as Gorky must have known when he chose his pseudonym. "Gorky," which he borrowed from the Russian writer, means bitter. Yet the

young artist had an exalted sense of himself as well. "Arshile" is Russian for Achilles.

The startling thing about the "Cézannes" and "Picassos" Gorky painted in the Twenties and Thirties is how close in spirit they are to the originals. Neither copies nor stylistic exercises "in the manner of," they are evidence of a deep struggle to assimilate the authority of the past. Gorky was a modernist—his progress traces the development of abstract art—yet he was no Utopian, no devotee of a perfected future. He believed that the forms of art are timeless. The individual artist interprets those forms for his own time.

Gorky achieved his maturity when his modernist self-education merged with his memories of childhood—a world of gardens, lakes, and traditional art—to produce a singular landscape. Surrealism was the catalyst.

Gorky first experimented with Surrealism in the mid-Thirties. The free-flowing, oddly organic forms of Miró and André Masson were especially important to him. Picasso himself was being influenced by Surrealism in those days, and his influence over Gorky persisted to the last years of the younger painter's life. The outbreak of World War II brought many of the Surrealist luminaries to exile in America. Gorky met them all—Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Masson, Matta Echaurren, and André Breton, the "pope" of Surrealism and author of its

*Manifestos*. Contact with these artists shifted the nature of Surrealism's influence on Gorky's art. Previously he had assimilated *forms*. Now, with the masters at hand, he learned a new *method*—automatism, that device for letting hidden images emerge from the unconscious into the light of art.

By 1945, Gorky had achieved enough liberty—and distinctiveness—for Breton to enroll him in the ranks of the Surrealists. No other American artist was given that honor. None was able, in 1945, to match the spontaneous origi-

nality of Gorky's images.

His mature paintings teem with forms, clearly organic and just as clearly mutant. Like Miró and Masson before him, Gorky invented his own biology and granted it its own laws of evolution. These laws are complex—one doesn't decipher so much as intuit them, while the shapes in Gorky's paintings refine and elaborate their basic premises. These include a relentless sexuality (Breton wouldn't have been interested otherwise). Sometimes a Gorky canvas seems to depict life forms in the process of becoming all genitalia. Yet there are always suggestions of landscape, of a world unified by a remembered light.



**"The Liver Is the Cock's Comb" (1944). Gorky's mature paintings teem with forms, clearly organic and just as clearly mutant. He invented his own biology and granted it his own laws of evolution.**

The modernist masters, the Surrealists, memories of his childhood—in the last years of his life, Gorky reached beyond all of these to an originality matched only by a few other members of the New York School.

He achieved success in the Forties—*aesthetic, not financial*—yet his life was more difficult than it had been during the harshest days of the Depression. In 1946, a studio fire destroyed many of his paintings. Later that year, he underwent an operation for cancer. Early in the summer of 1948, his paint-

ing arm was paralyzed in a car accident. His wife left him soon after, taking their two children. At the age of 44, Gorky hanged himself. The writhing, seething forms of his art convey his desperation, which he appears to have felt throughout his life of displacement and loss.

Yet there is more here, a struggle to find forms with the strength to occupy, to measure and thus master, that daunting infinity which so many modernists have faced—the fact of infinite possibility. Barnett Newman's infinities are luminous, while Mark Rothko's sense of painting's open-endedness was, as he said, "tragic." Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning take still other

stances toward their art—and thus toward life. What joins them all together as founding members of the New York School is their willingness to admit that there is an infinite, and a potentially terrifying one, to be faced by the artist of our times. Understandably, few Europeans were up to the project in the wake of World War II. Only in the new world was there strength to continue the modernist experiment. And a crucial portion of that strength is to be seen in the life force that animates Arshile Gorky's art. ■

# RECORDS

Stephen Wadsworth

## A Perfect "Parsifal"

In the last few years the Berlin Philharmonic, under Herbert Von Karajan, has become a monster of technical perfection. These formidable instrumentalists are wildly indulged by their Svengali maestro with the result that their virtuosity is often obtrusive, as on their wrongly smooth *Tosca* and dreary, Mercedes-Benz *Magic Flute*, two recent lemons from Deutsche Grammophon. But on their new recording of Wagner's *Parsifal* (5-Deutsche Grammophon, digital 2741002, \$54.90, cassette 3382002) Karajan, a symphonist first and foremost, is in his element, and he fastidiously structures preludes, acts, and ultimately this whole symphonic opera without forsaking its humanism—whether big issues or little gestures—or indulging either himself or his orchestra unduly.

It is a relief to have such a natural, flowing opera recording from Karajan. His *Parsifal* has all the dramatic weight of Hans Knappertsbusch's two Bayreuth recordings of the work with none of their self-absorbed Wagnerianism. It moves inexorably forward but without the occasionally frantic drive of the Georg Solti version. I like the glassy, cool-stream textures of Pierre Boulez's Bayreuth set, but Karajan's equally delicate reading is deepened by a tenderness Boulez habitually plays against.

In fact, the most engaging feature of this *Parsifal* is its cultivation of frailty. Most of the singers eschew heroics for Lieder-singer intimacy, creating complex private dramas with hushed, warmly diffused tone. And Karajan, also profoundly introspective and searching at key moments, is awesomely articulate when rising lines—of faith and hope—suddenly, nightmarishly, stop rising and turn to fall despairingly. The

essence of Wagner is somehow expressed in this paradox of simultaneous rise and fall.

As Amfortas, José Van Dam does some of the most consistently beautiful singing I have heard on record. He has a soft-grained, cello-like bass-baritone, and a way with the words. He is infinitely human as a character; his one tortured high G makes him human as a singer. Kurt Moll is hardly less good as Gurnemanz. His limitless black bass has the flexibility of a lyric baritone. With seamless bel canto line and perfect diction, he makes the Act I monologue—which can be one of opera's



great snores—positively entertaining.

Dunja Vejzovic is not a major vocalist, but she turns in a major performance, never selling discount craziness as the woman who laughed at Christ on the cross. Her *Wahnsinn* is the real thing, and her moans and shrieks are truly pitiable rather than grotesque. This Kundry works hard for her salvation. The voice runs a little wild (this is entirely appropriate, really), but it is an unusual, haunting, sopranoish mezzo, tellingly inflected. Tenor Peter Hofmann is a better-looking than sounding Parsifal. The voice, bullied about a bit, is not capable of the softening effects

the others achieve; nor does Hofmann seem as perceptive a singer as his colleagues. But he does seem a convincingly sincere and foolish innocent, which is what Parsifal is supposed to be. The Flowermaidens are a distinctive bunch led by Barbara Hendricks, who has a ravishing high soprano but gummy diction. The depth of casting is typical of Karajan and fully justified.

It is hard to say where the Berlin Philharmonic plays best. Certainly the winds are extraordinarily mellifluous—the choir supporting Parsifal's apostrophe to the magic of Good Friday I listened to over and over again, astonished. The violins, too, can sound like one sweet-toned virtuoso, although—and this is nice for a change—they aren't perfect. In at least two crucial spots the strings are quite *untogether*. The DG engineers also seem to be cultivating frailty. Surfaces on a review copy are noisy, and there is some noticeable splicing, but these are humanizing flaws. DG, like the Berlin Philharmonic, is often bloodlessly *korrekt*.

The digital process seems to increase the possibilities of this orchestra in this opera. It might well be that digital captures the sonic properties of voices more faithfully than the old analog process. Here the singers and players sound remarkably natural, the blends remarkably spacious—it's not that opaque canned sound on opera recordings of the Sixties and Seventies. Describing the realm of the Holy Grail to Parsifal, Gurnemanz says, "*Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit*" (Here time becomes space). For all its technical and interpretive glories—and the fraught limbo of spirituality it inhabits—Gurnemanz could have been talking about this performance, the first indisputably great opera recording in some time. ■