

Boris Christoff Returns For a Concert Monday

By JOHN ROCKWELL

The word "legendary" is tossed about casually in the world of opera. But Boris Christoff, who will be making his first New York appearance in 20 years Monday night at Carnegie Hall, deserves the attribution. With his black bass — still in fine condition, to judge from London reviews of just last year — and his flamboyant theatricality, Mr. Christoff has been a riveting figure on the operatic stage for over 30 years, especially in his two specialty roles, Boris Godunov and King Philip II in Verdi's "Don Carlo." But not on the operatic stages of New York.

Mr. Christoff gave a concert performance of Rossini's "Mosè in Egitto" here in 1958, and appeared in 1960 in an orchestrally accompanied concert similar to the one he will present Monday. His absence from the musical scene here since can be attributed to a variety of factors — international politics, his volatile temperament, scurrilous opera rumors, his limited repertory and, perhaps above all, the simple accidents of operatic casting.

For when one speaks of "New York," one means the Metropolitan Opera. Mr. Christoff was scheduled to open Rudolf Bing's first season at the Met in 1950 in the new production of "Don Carlo." But his Bulgarian nationality and time spent in Italy and Austria as a student in the early 1940's led the United States Government, in those restrictive years, to deny him a visa. After that Mr. Bing had other basses in his stable, and what discussions there were with Mr. Christoff always broke down. And since Mr. Bing's departure, the Met has made no further overtures to him.

"Mr. Bing was against me; he prevented my contact with the public of the Metropolitan Opera," Mr. Christoff growled in his cavernous, larger-than-life way. Spoken with first by telephone from London, then encountered in person the other day in New York, Mr. Christoff seems to live the parts he plays; he's a ruddy-faced, white-haired man with big eyes and a hearty but imperious manner, quick to respond both warmly and angrily. "For an artist who has been everywhere to be excluded from one of the great opera houses of the world is a sad thing," he continues.

Turned Down Bing Offer

One offer Mr. Christoff did have from Mr. Bing was to sing in a Peter Brook production of "Faust," but he turned it down. Mr. Christoff has always felt free to pass judgment on the productions he's part of, and if they strike him as too willful or eccentric, he refuses to go on — in fact, he almost boycotted his American debut at the last minute on such grounds, as "Boris" in San Francisco in 1956.

Such behavior won him a reputation for excessive temperament — which used to be almost a given in the world of opera but is less so today, what with modern opera bureaucracies and stage directors in charge of things. "I am against the illogical way to present operas," he explains. "Most modern regisseurs try to destroy the principles of the past."

In 1964 Mr. Christoff had a near-fatal brain operation, and rumors began to circulate that whatever the problem was, it had exacerbated his colorful behavior — including such incidents as

an onstage, for-real swordfight with Franco Corelli, the tenor. But Mr. Christoff says that his problem was an aneurysm that struck suddenly and without warning, and that the operation, although extremely dangerous, had cured him completely.

"There was no sign of troubles. And then one night I was driving the car and it hit me like a hammer in the back of the head. I was dead, completely, except for this one young surgeon."

Incident at Bolshoi

His troubles with opera houses were not limited to the Met. In the mid-1960's he was scheduled to do "Boris" at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. But, he says, at the last moment he was denied the agreed-upon rehearsal time, and he withdrew. Why did the Russians do that, one wondered? "Only to put Mr. Christoff in difficulties and the worst position," he answered.

His difficulties in the centers of both capitalism and Communism are symptomatic. All his life he seems to have run afoul of politics, but he insists that he is staunchly apolitical. His latest imbroglio came when he decided to donate his family estate in Sofia and his house in Rome for the purpose of establishing a school for talented young Bulgarian singers. He himself had gone to Rome in 1942 at the age of 23 to study with Riccardo Stracciari, on a stipend from King Boris of Bulgaria.

His attempted generosity has been thwarted so far, however, by the protests of Bulgarian dissident groups in the West, who accuse him of supporting the Communist regime. The charge annoys him, to say the least.

"I am disgusted and sad," he said. "My whole politics is my art of singing — that is my work. My donation is for the young people who like to study music; the regimes change, but our country remains always the same."

Sees Young Misusing Gifts

Mr. Christoff's interest in young singers comes in part from his conviction that they are misusing their gifts. "They sing great roles without preparation, only to make money," he complains. "It is a pity, because they have wonderful voices. But in five or six years they are destroyed."

Mr. Christoff's own refusal to push himself may well explain his vocal longevity. "I do not sing too much," he says. "I do not push over the possibility of the voice." But at the same time his tendency to refuse engagements if the circumstances aren't just right, and the narrowness of his Western operatic repertory, have further limited his opportunities.

Monday's Carnegie Hall concert is being presented by the Music Society (formerly the Sacred Music Society). Randolph Mickelson, its general director, says he first thought of Mr. Christoff for a concert performance of Rossini's "Mosè," then for some complete Russian opera. But casting difficulties, plus the realization that more of Mr. Christoff could be heard in a concert, finally resulted in Monday's program, which will be centered on Mr. Christoff's two favorites, Mussorgsky and Verdi.

Assuming all goes well on Monday, would Mr. Christoff ever consider coming to the Met, were he to be asked? "Of

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course," he answered readily. "But it all depends — how do they ask? In which way? You must understand, people ask me why I didn't want to sing in America. The problem was not with me but with American institutions. I return now with joy to America, where I sang for many years with the most flattering press and with the affectionate attitude of the public."