

Jazz: 'Blues in Subway'

Levister Work Performed in 'Village' Is Marred by Amplifying System

By JOHN S. WILSON

A "JAZZ OPERA," Alonzo Levister's "Blues in the Subway," had its first performance Saturday at midnight at Loew's Sheridan Theatre, Seventh Avenue and Eleventh Street. The presentation of Mr. Levister's brief work did not resolve the question of whether there is, or can be, such a thing as a "jazz opera" for it was offered under circumstances that made any rational judgment of it impossible.

The primary villain was an amplifying system that amplified slightly but shattered totally. It reduced the singing of the three members of the cast and the accompaniment of a small instrumental group led by Mr. Levister to an inert, clattering rattle with all the musical coherence of a far distant radio station heard through a curtain of static.

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It is possible to report that "Blues in the Subway" takes place in a subway car, which was indicated by a small, painted flat in front of which the three principals sat. They were a drunk, sung by Robert Battle, and a girl, Eva La O, and boy, Ralph Christianson.

One got the impression that Mr. Levister's writing for his singers was "straight," that there were little, if any, jazz elements in it. As far as could be ascertained under the circumstances, what jazz qualities this short opera had were

confined to the instrumental accompaniment performed by a group made up of tenor saxophone, piano, string bass and drums.

It was evident that the tenor saxophonist, Curtis Porter, was improvising in a jazz vein at times. The others may have been, too, but the clank and rattle of the amplifiers successfully covered all but the most obvious sounds. It strangled the singers so effectively that this listener was unable to decipher anything that might have suggested what happened on this operatic subway ride.

It is obviously unfair both to Mr. Levister and to those who paid to hear his "jazz opera" to have it presented in such shabby, self-defeating circumstances. At its close, Jean Shepherd, the master of ceremonies, remarked philosophically to (and about) the audience: "We are people who are used to vicissitude and ineptitude." But even a jazz audience is rarely asked to tolerate vicissitude and ineptitude on such a monstrous scale.

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The program also included performances by Anita O'Day, Tony Scott's Quintet with Ben Webster, and Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. Aside from a microphone that fell apart in Mr. Scott's hand and occasional bursts of feedback, they had more luck with the amplifying system than Mr. Levister did.