

*Cairo Symphony Orchestra;
Pops IV; Butch Thompson,
piano and Mohamed
Hamdy, clarinet; Michael
Luxner, conductor; Main
Hall, Cairo Opera House;
13 June 1998*

A breath of jelly

joy and blues made the night

by David Blake

The other night in Cairo a moment of sheer delection was snatched out of the city pandemonium by Butch Thompson, the pianist, on a second visit to Cairo. He was playing a mostly orchestra accompanied programme, but suddenly everything was brought to a stop without any announcement as he slipped into a song by the blues poet of the piano Jelly Roll Morton.

Hush up, Jelly is at the keys. The big audience was mute and so was the night as suddenly out fluttered one of Jelly Roll's aphorisms of heartbreak. It hovered like a moon moth near the keyboard of Butch Thompson who delivered its phantasma of multi-coloured small flashes, then it shot off up out of the roof of the opera house. Too, too brief, but an evocatin of race, history and life. Being history isn't always fun, but Jelly Roll Morton's music is sheer nectar spiced with deadly small goutts of pain.

In Butch Thompson's tender, loving care, with his light touch of feathery strength, the piece was a blue-black note and what the true art of pianism is always about.

This concert, called Pops IV, was rather more than a multi-vitamin dose. It had nourishment, everyday goodies done so well and, with no pretensions, it was real, clear and full of brightness. Nothing sounded tarnished or over-played. How many times have we heard the Bernstein dances from *West Side Story* pumped up by Boston Symphonic to orchestral proportions? But this night it sounded fresh made.

After this came one of Cairo's treasures, the clarinetist Mohamed Hamdy. Whatever goes wrong at a concert, or whatever the music to be played, when Hamdy begins the shades come off the lights, and we bathe in his wonderful, lively energising tone. He seems to have no grey spots or weary

nights, giving air and light to Mozart or Richard Strauss and, on this night, Coplands's *Concerto for clarinet*.

The second half of the concert was dedicated to jazz joys, blues and just plain everyday musicals. But Eubie Blake, Jelly Roll Morton and Scott Joplin are something else. They are the music of the Fall or the finish, and it is still approaching. It is music of situation as much as notes. It has a smell of its own, the smell of smoke, blues smoke. It is going to be immortal this music. It makes you long for something, but you don't know for what. Escape maybe.

The blue note, with its flattened thirds and sevenths, was sorrow music which took to the streets where it still is, stormy and blue. Be careful not to open the door too wide. Something besides the light will come in.