FOLK SINGERS

For the Love of It

"There ain't no place around this holy town where a fella can get all them devils out of his throat," the expatriate folk singer complained—and he was right: for all its glories, Rome had no nightclub for folk singers. Such a cultural omission might have been easily endurable, but when an American Negro painter named Harold Bradley opened his Il Folk Studio two years ago, Rome greeted it like springtime. Since then, the Studio has become a genuine academy of folkloric song and is fast becoming the most popular club in the city. Last week, noting the Studio's importance to the musical life of Rome, the Italian government even promised Bradley a subsidy.

The Studio's polyglot performers turn the dim basement room into a Cellar of Babel. Tennessee banjo pickers and American Negro folk singers take their turns with such musicians as a Sudanese oud player and a Japanese painter who sings improvised melodies to verses from Confucius. One night's program may include everything from a down-home treatment of Ballin' the Jack to a Yugoslavian dirge, and there is a down-home treatment of Ballin' the Jack to a Yugoslavian dirge, and there is even one Italian folk singer whose songs are collected in the best ethnic tradition—from peasants, workmen, and lifers in an open-air prison in Sardinia.

Bradley, a 33-year-old former fullback for the Cleveland Browns, offers his audience as few comforts as possible. The Studio serves only hot wine and popcorn, and the customers are crowded unmercifully into a room scarcely larger than a pool table. The boss pays his performers only food and a down-home treatment of Ballin' the Jack to a Yugoslavian dirge, and there is even one Italian folk singer whose songs are collected in the best ethnic tradition—from peasants, workmen, and lifers in an open-air prison in Sardinia.

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Bradley still has trouble explaining the source of his ambition. He gets a "retruing" sense from folk songs, he says. But his success can be stated simply: for both audience and performers, the Studio offers the pleasure of making music for the love of it.

ORATORIOS

The Meaning of the Rats

The narrator's voice is cold. Thousands of rats, he says, have come from the cellars and sewers to die in the city's streets. The plague has begun. The dead will be carried away in tramcars. There is a panicked whisper of running feet, a scream, a distant moan. The chorus is a clamor of wails—"the rats, the rats." Trombones trail down the declining moan of an air-raid siren, and the orchestra shrinks in echoed despair. In a long, fatal moment, the music dies on the slowly fading tremor of a gong. And in that long moment last week, a hushed audience at London's Royal Festival Hall perceived the chilling profundity of Roberto Gerhard's The Plague, an oratorio of terror based on the novel by Albert Camus.

Climate of Fear. Gerhard (TIME, Jan. 18, 1963) approached the novel almost piously, and his libretto lost little of the power of Camus' bitter wisdom: as in the novel, the rats may be real, but the plague is only a shadow of the greater horrors man makes for himself. "The plague," said Conductor Antal Dorati, "is all diseases of the mind, every dictatorship, every war, and there is no real freedom as long as there are pestilences. The rats may come again to the happy city. This is the message."

Making the point in music required a storm of inventiveness, and Gerhard, 67, proved himself to be a resourceful composer. Violin bows drawn across cymbals' edges make their pale, tortured protest as they create an eerie, shimmering climate of fear. A nail file raked across piano strings evokes wind against telegraph wires. The murmur and patter of the rats in the streets is sounded by cellists tapping clamped strings.

Such stunts were scarcely noticed beneath the spell cast by the premiere. With Dorati conducting the BBC Symphony and Chorus and Actor Stephen Murray narrating the dark libretto, Gerhard's difficult music got the intense performance it requires and deserves. The audience—having held its emotional breath for 40 minutes—responded with a sustained ovation.

A Shutter's Creak. The Plague is neither as sustained nor complex as Benjamin Britten's War Requiem, but it invites comparison to that modern masterwork in its personal comment on a desperate universal theme. A Spanish exile who lives in near hermitry outside Cambridge, Gerhard spent more than a year fashioning his brilliantly distilled libretto from Stuart Gilbert's translation of the novel, then found the music for his words in six more months. The score has only the merest wisps of melody, but the music achieves some deeply stirring and unnerving moments—as when an orchestral whistler mimics the creak of a shutter in an empty street.

Gerhard's affinity for Camus first led him to consider writing an opera based on the late French author's bleak first novel, The Stranger, and he still plans to do the work—if he can win a commission. But while lying ill two years ago, the musical approach to the message of The Plague struck him. "It is man's bestiality to man, and the pestilence is the fight against terror." That message, he says, "took my imagination by storm."