ARTS & LETTERS

Balloon People

"Botero's Blow-Ups" by Jasia Reichardt, in *Art International* (July-Aug. 1983), Via Maraini, 17-A, Lugano, Switzerland (CH-6900).

Colombian artist Fernando Botero's idiosyncratic paintings of fat people have won him a measure of fame in recent years. Yet the artist's obsession with inflated figures remains a mystery.

Since his first "fat mode" painting in the mid-1950s, Botero's work has centered on depictions of overblown "bishops, generals, tarts, aunts, and ordinary citizens" from his native Colombia, writes Reichardt. (Botero, an expatriate since 1960, now lives in New York.) The artist has offered only evasive explanations of his style—he claims that his subjects are actually thin, that blowing them up makes them more sensual, or that all art involves deformation.

The effects of Botero's style are clear. Inanimate objects and animals are endowed with unusual life and prominence when blown up. Indeed, Reichardt observes, Botero reserves for animals "expressions of friendship, pleasure, aggression, horror, or amusement." His melancholy human characters, almost always presented in couples or groups, stare straight out from the canvas, "even if they are engaged in making love." Inflation irons out many of their distinctive features, making them all

A typical painting by the prolific Fernando Botero: Three Musicians *(1983).*

seem interchangeable. Their straight-ahead stares, as well as their size, emphasize their alienation from one another, and from the viewer.

Many artists have influenced Botero's work, says Reichardt, but he owes his largest debt to the great French painter Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), who also painted "outsized puppets" (usually children) in dreamlike settings. Yet Botero's eccentric vision is his own. It may be impossible to discover *why* he paints the way he does, Reichardt says, but he does succeed in creating on canvas little worlds of "hypnotic clarity" with the timeless quality of myths.

Two Musical Populists

"Mahler and Ives: Populist Archaism and Musical Innovation" by Carl E. Schorske, in *The Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Oct. 1983), Norton's Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

At the turn of the century, two composers who would help to revolutionize classical music rose to prominence on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In their backgrounds, Charles Ives (1874–1954) and Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) could hardly have been more different, writes Schorske, a Princeton historian, yet each injected a strong note of populism into the prevailing classical style of music.

Ives was the scion of an old-line New England Yankee family. His father, flouting his parents' preference for more "respectable" vocations, became the all-purpose music master—choir director, dance band leader, violinist—of Danbury, Connecticut. Under his father's tutelage, young Charles learned to play everything from gospel and ragtime to classical standards. Mahler, born to a family of poor but upwardly mobile Austrian Jews, was immersed in high culture during his boyhood in Iglau (now in Czechoslovakia).

In 1875, a patron paid the young Mahler's way to the Vienna Conservatory. There, he was caught up in the general enthusiasm for composer Richard Wagner's nationalistic odes to the common folk. Thus inspired, Mahler wove the music of provincial Iglau—Czech folk songs, military marches, peasant waltzes—into his first four symphonies.

Ives followed the opposite path to musical populism. Unlike his iconoclastic father, Ives hewed to family tradition and enrolled at Yale in 1894. After graduating, he became an insurance salesman and began composing as an avocation. Unlike Mahler, Ives scorned high culture as effeminate. Strains of the popular music of his boyhood reappeared in such scores as *New England Holidays* (1904–13).

Popular music had found its way into classical composition before Mahler and Ives, Schorske notes. But it had been built into traditional musical structures. The two avant-gardists' arrangements shattered old forms by using their folk themes more naturally. Audiences and music critics found their music chaotic. By today's standards, it seems fairly tame—but that is because Ives and Mahler freed the composers who came after them to explore even more radically different forms.