

VICTOR HERBERT'S PLACE IN AMERICAN MUSIC

How His Many Operettas Have Distracted Attention from His Attainments as Profound and Richly Gifted Musician—
A Commanding Figure in Realm of Serious Composition

By HERBERT F. PEYSER

THERE are times when the element of genius concentrated in a single individual capriciously assumes a variety of forms more or less related, and in so doing develops into an embarrassment of riches capable of proving a poignant handicap. Humanity, ardently appreciative of artistic talents manifested in one specific manner, would seek to constrain their possessor from altering that medium of expression. It may actually seek to belittle if not repudiate altogether his endeavors to utter his message along lines more gratifying to his fancy. For the world likes to see its geniuses and talents duly labelled and classified, and, having associated them with one sphere of action, it takes unkindly to an enforced readjustment of perspective. Rubinstein, it will be recalled, went to his grave thoroughly embittered at the thought that his fame as a pianist militated insuperably against his serious acceptance as a composer. Offenbach's dearest wish was to convince his contemporaries that the accustomed ribaldry of his works had not made him incapable of seriousness. And so he wrote the "Tales of Hoffmann," which he never lived to complete fully. Liszt grew to abhor his piano in his ambition to devote himself to creative labors, though to the public of his day Liszt was first and last the transcendently brilliant pianist. And in our own day Paderewski enjoys not a tittle of the distinction he merits as a creative power, solely because of his potent fascinations in an interpretative capacity.

This strange and unhappy tendency has contrived to deprive Victor Herbert of some of the profound respect due him as a consummately gifted musician and serious composer. Mr. Herbert has written up to the present stage of his career some thirty-five operettas. Now, in despite of plenteous available testimony to the contrary, there persists a well-grounded belief in America that the purveyor of light opera cannot justly lay pretensions to esteem as a profound musician. And, therefore, even in the face of the exceptionally wrought operetta scores for which he has stood sponsor, his full significance is not as universally grasped and appreciated as it ought and as it unquestionably is destined to be.

Withal Victor Herbert must be reckoned with as one of the commanding figures in contemporary American music. His opera, "Natoma," susceptible as it may be to criticism on several grounds, would alone suffice to prove this. To precisely what further extent his new opera, "Madeleine" (the Metropolitan's American novelty for the coming year), will enhance his stature remains to be seen. The essential is that in an enumeration of native composers of the first rank Victor Herbert be not an afterthought. To dismiss him lightly is to err grievously. To undervalue the original characteristics of his musical personality is a confession of egregious ignorance.

Mr. Herbert has written orchestral suites (the New York Philharmonic once gave his "Romantic Suite" and might repeat the deed to good purpose), two cello concertos, choral work of large dimensions and songs, all of which attest the thoroughness of his technical grasp. The songs are comparatively early works of no great pretensions to originality. In a measure they still exhale the scent of German conventionality. Yet they might now and then figure to advantage on recital programs to-day, being markedly superior to much that is thus dignified. The second cello concerto displays facility and beauty of invention and an easy grasp of form.

A Natural Medium

It cannot be gainsaid that Victor Herbert has been most prodigal in his expenditure of creative energy in the domain of opera comique. It has been intimated that his entry into this field was prompted by motives other than a compelling tendency toward this medium. The allegation steadily loses weight as one contemplates the musical idiom of these operettas. Seldom could a style more consistently adapted to the genre be encountered. The light opera manner in its truest form is an integral part of Mr. Herbert's musical nature. His

characteristic utterance is in its way as distinctive, as individual, as free as that of every great foreign composer of comic opera from Strauss to Arthur Sullivan. His melodic flow is facile, superabundant and generally original. To be sure, his ex-

cessive productivity has not suffered him to maintain anything like an even level of excellence. He has occasionally lapsed into banality and has not infrequently stooped to conquer. Against the writing of essentially cheap "topical songs," seasoned for Broadway approval, he has had no serious scruples. On the other hand, his ability to surpass all his previous efforts in point of sheer melodic wealth, delicacy and refinement of feeling and amazing fineness of workmanship, as he has done in the recently produced "Sweethearts" is little short of marvelous—all the more when one reflects upon the number previously put forth. So obviously abundant are the man's resources that, properly husbanded, they should not be exhausted for years to come.

Victor Herbert, Eminent American Composer, Whose Opera, "Madeleine," Is to Be Produced This Season by Metropolitan Opera Company

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But if Mr. Herbert possesses one strongly characteristic style in his lighter scores he boasts of another, widely different but quite an unmistakably individualized, in compositions of a more serious aspect. While discernible in Herbert's earlier written orchestral works, this manner disclosed itself in its full potency in "Natoma." A forceful, personal expression, it savors far less of an obvious basis of models than the musical speech of numerous Americans more widely recognized in the quality of serious composers. There is striking individuality of orchestral color, together with a distinctiveness (and, one may add, distinction) of harmonic formation and character of melodic phraseology. To be sure, Mr. Herbert's usage of successions of secondary seventh harmonies bears so close a resemblance to this pet mannerism of Edward MacDowell as to suggest a close study of the works of the greatest American on the part of the author of "Natoma." And yet the device may be noted back in one of the songs of opus 18. But whether inspired by MacDowell or not, it is invariably employed to good purpose. It adds delightful zest and piquancy to the score of "Sweethearts."

"Natoma," however, revealed a clash, an unwarrantable juxtaposition of the two styles. Their respective natures are such as

to make successful fusion impossible. The instance is practically one of musical oil and water. It is credible that with further operatic experience Mr. Herbert will attempt no such venture. Momentary application of the grand style to comic opera is permissible, and in some cases even desirable. But the reverse is a flagrant error, a practice to be shunned at all costs. Musical delineation of the lighter moments of grand opera cannot legitimately be accomplished in pure operetta manner. The best comic opera passage forfeits its most characteristic excellence when transplanted to the more august lyrical environment.

A close observer of musical progress, Mr. Herbert is yet no copyist. That of which he may see fit to avail himself is well saturated with the essence of his own artistic personality before it forms a component part of his own scores. His craftsmanship, his dexterous manipulation of technical resources, as may be inferred from all the foregoing, are probably unsurpassed by any American musician to-day. The fact

him have dragged more than one charming score to an unmerited oblivion. The incredible fatuities of the "Natoma" text have served almost to make of this book a mock classic. And yet such defects seem in no wise to impede the easy flow of Herbert's inspiration—an unfortunate matter, for this lack of discrimination is bound eventually to result more or less disastrously. Strange to say, Mr. Herbert has written some of his best music to some of the poorest poetic passages that confronted him. And yet he has a saving power of dramatic understanding and utterance—consider the magnificent tone poem that ushers in the third act of "Natoma" and the splendidly impassioned soliloquy of the Indian maiden shortly afterward.

It would be futile at present to split hairs over the question of the "Americanism" of Victor Herbert's work before some definition and some tangible exemplification of the archetype of "Americanism" in music can be clearly pointed out. Suffice it to remember that of all the American-made operas heard in the Metropolitan Opera House in the last decade, "Natoma" steadily maintains its place as the best. If it is now to be displaced it can be defeated only by "Madeleine"—which, after all, will merely signify a further triumph for Victor Herbert over Victor Herbert.

PHILHARMONIC SEAT SALE

Substantial Increase Already Shown in Advance Orders for Concerts

The New York Philharmonic Society's public sale of season subscription seats for the New York series of concerts has opened at Carnegie Hall. The tickets are for twelve Thursday evenings, sixteen Friday afternoons and twelve Sunday afternoons. The Friday afternoon series, always well attended, is practically sold out by advance orders, and there is also a substantial increase in the subscription to the Thursday evening and Sunday afternoon concerts. The Thursday evening series has been reduced from sixteen concerts of last season to twelve concerts this year and the Sunday afternoon subscriptions were increased from eight to twelve concerts.

Conductor Strinsky, who has just returned from Europe, has issued a call to the orchestra and rehearsals will begin at once. The opening concert of the season will take place at Carnegie Hall on Thursday evening, October 30, and on November 2 the orchestra will be heard at Symphony Hall, Boston.

Wilhelm Bachaus Made Court Pianist

The Grand Duke of Hesse has bestowed on Wilhelm Bachaus the title of Court Pianist. The honor is one that is greatly coveted, and it is regarded as an acknowledgment of the exalted position which Bachaus now occupies in the musical world. Bachaus recently wrote Loudon Charlton, under whose management he is to make his second American tour, that he had prepared a series of programs of this much heralded trip. His first New York appearance is scheduled for November 19, and his first Boston recital for November 20. Regarding his orchestral appearances, Mr. Bachaus writes that he considers Dr. Neitzel's concerto extremely effective and he hopes to play it in this country. On October 8 he will play this work in Sonderhausen, and on October 24 in Dresden.

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