MOST POPULAR LIVING COMPOSER

No Other Who Writes Serious Music Has Established so Widespread a Cult as Puccini-Most Gifted Operatic Craft man in Italy Since Verdi-His Keen Sense of Theatrical Fitness-A Facile Melodist Though Not a Great One-Exaltation of Spirit and Elemental Passion Absent from His Works-The Puccini

By HERBERT F. PEYSER

Fourth in Series of Articles on Contemporary Operatic Composition

PUCCINI is a talent of the first magnitude born under In the sense of material pros perity he is the most fortunate living composer of serious music. No end of uncomplimentary things are said about the unholy commercialism of Richard Strauss. and innumerable have been the occasions on which his artistic sincerity was openly challenged by reason of the exorbitant sums he is wont to exact for his works. Yet, the Italian maintains the distinct advantage.

Strauss is a revolutionist and the musical revolutionist must bide his time before



Giacomo Puccini (Right) and Carig-nani, One of the Librettists of "The Girl of the Golden West"

Girl of the Golden West:

he can count decisively upon the wholehearted support of middle-class arristic
appreciation. Puccini does not aspire to
the glories that may or may not recompense the avowed reformer. He is loved,
cherished, idolized. Perhaps the emotion
he stimulates in his volaries is more the
than the deep-reaching veneration of a
seer and a prophet; but it is very genuine
and very intense while it lasts and cannot
be lightly disregarded. The adoration of
Puccini does not imply what the discerning
worship of Beethoven and Wagner signimusical appreciation that necessitates consideration, however much one may feel impelled to esteem it as of transitory moment.

ment. Even those differences of national ten perament which may sometimes engender in one country a sentiment of antipathy to-ward some characteristic phase of musical expression of another are no serious bar to the extensiveness of the Puccini cult. Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Belglund, America-ordin and south-demand their "Boheme," their "Tosca" and

their "Butterfly" in a manner that is not to be gainsaid. These works crowd the opera houses as did "Lucia," "Sonnambula" and the rest of their musical lik in the olden and the rest of their musical lik in the olden days. Time was when the worldly wise impresario's motto of caution read "When in doubt put on "Faust." Today he substitutes "Bohème" or "Tosca" or "Butter-High-number on botheadre prima nomas burn with an ardent zeal to triumph as burn with an ardent zeal to triumph as burn or Tosca, the ambitious vocal student yearns to exercise her youthful powers on "Un Bel di." "Vissi d'arte" or "Mi Chiamano Mimii," while hotel or restaurant orchestras revel in "Paccini "selectaurant and production of the product der and sentimental mercies. It all delights those dear souls who do not like their "classical music" to be "too heavy" and "classical music" to be "too heavy" and incidentally pays composer and publishers a king's ransom. Certainly if popular adulation were an infallible sign of genius Puccini's immortality would long since have been assured.

have been assured. There are not wanting those who serenely affirm the absoluteness of the man's genius. The ancient, if fallacious, tendency to esteem intense and extensive popularity as an unimpeachable proof of purest genius will not down. Analyze Puccini for those qualities of spirit that constitute the essence of nues or spirit that constitute the essence of lasting greatness and he is found wanting. But if he is not for all time he is unques-tionably for an age. And in his age he is a fascinating power.

In Comparison with Verdi

Whether or not Puccini is to be r garded as the rightful successor to t glories of Verdi is a question that can satisfactorily answered only by the G bertian "Bless you, it all depends." Tr bertian "Bless you it all "peptids". True erough, no bigger man has arrisen in Italy since Verdi's career ended. Yet the origi-nal creative genius of the mind which con-ceived an "Aida" and "Otello" is foreign to the composer of "Boheme". There is a greater degree of original invention, a more convincing sincerity of utterance and a more subtle lineness of expression in the first half of the Nile scene in "Aida" than Lescau" to the "Girl of the Golden West" combined.

On the other hand Puccini is by far the most gifted and consummate operatic crafts-man in Italy since Verdi brought his task to a close. And he has steadily remained man in Italy since Verdi brought his task to a close. And he has steadily remained for something like the past decade and a half the most imposing musical figure of Italy. Occasional promises to dislodge him from the proud eminence of his position from the proud eminence of his position deed, plenty of annual operatic small-talk current in Italy, from Milan to Sorrento. There are never-ceasing rumors of glorious newcomers. Yet a pathetically short space of time proves them to be little more than lusterless shyrochest, far less impressive are than the short-libed, protechnical even than the short-libed, protechnical with the continue to compose with fruitless. Mascagni and Leoncavano. Ineset two worthies continue to compose with fruitless vehemence. The senescent Verdi professed faith in the future of Umberto Giordano. It is still unjustified. The Munich-trained faith in the future of Umberto Gordano. It is still unjustified. The Munich-trained Venetian, Wolf-Ferrari, loomed large upon the horizon for a time. Closer acquanitance has rather diminished his stature. Then there have been at this time or at that Glea and Tasec and Spinelli and Catalani and Franchetti and Smargetian anitrafforth and Iso on. The record is particularly and details may be spire. Place beside

their works a few bars out of "Otello" and the incandescence of Verdi's genius their works a few pars out on and the incandescence of Verdi's genius will wither and consume them like a reed in a furnace. Just at the present moment fair prophecies are held forth on behalf of the prophecies are held forth on behalf of the prophecies are held forth on behalf of the prophecies are set of the prophecies are very different from this one, who shall say that he will not develop into a composer of real importance?

Something of the Meyerbe

By contrast with these men Puccini be-comes a gigantic figure. He has a most admirable sense of immediate theatrical ef-fectiveness. He has a strongly developed musical personality and a superb technical equipment. Unlike the small fry of his na-



"If Popular Adulation Were an Infallible Sign of Genius, Puccini's Immortality Would Long Since Have Been As-

tion he has the skill to assimilate the new tion ne nas the skill to assimilate the new inventions of composers more original than himself and of bending them to his purposes without becoming their slave. There is something of the Meyerbeer about Puccini—not, of course, as regards actual musical suggestiveness, but in method of the course procedure. Like Meyerbeer he is ever most keenly alert to the immediate pleasure of the public, and like Meyerbeer he is in reality an eclectic. But, gifted with a musicianship infinitely profounder, more complex and comprehensive, he knows how to simulate a homogeneity of style that the composer of the "Huguenots" could never

to simulate a homogeneity of style that the composer of the "Hugenots" could never Popular taste in opera is vastly different today from what it was in 1800-40. Speciacular stage pageantry no longer atones for halting dramatic interest and meagerness of orchestral effect. A modern Meyerhis hands. The demand is for emotional tenseness and a greatly accelerated dramatic motion, while even those who have failed to appreciate Wagner in the truest sense long intuitively for a measure of harmonic grandfathers and a lavishness of orchestral color that would have dumfounded their worthy progenitors. Modern Germany and France offer splendid fields for browsing to that or the property of the color than the color that would have dumfounded their worthy progenitors. Modern Germany and France offer splendid fields for browsing to that or the color than the color

happily he has the saving grace of a definite individuality.
Puccini is not descended from Verdi. Like the rest of the neo-Italians he stems claim to the control of the co secondary harmonies of the minth, eleventh and thirteenth. He studied "Pelleas" sedulously. By the time he reached "Madama lously, By the time he reached Madama ion had been made to fit snugly into his general scheme of things. He disclosed exceptional skill in the manner in which he amalgamated it with the more conventually made to the second of the

cept as Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Persian, Arabian, Algerian, Moroccan, or whatever else you will that is outlandish and unfamiliar to them, almost anything that sounds extraordinary. True, Puccini incorporated in his score a couple of actual Japanese tunes, but the chord combinations and instrumental colors were what most effectually established the desired atmost-effectually established the desired atmost

A Fluent Melodist

The vaunted Italian melodic faculty has deteriorated considerably since the days of Verdi. Puccini himself is a fluent and a facile melodist but not a great one. His facile melodist but not a great one. His melodies have suavity, breadth, roundness of contour, and on occasion, passion and strength. They are magnificently singable—the modern Italian has not forfeited his birthright of skillful vocal writing. But they have not true originality nor are they spiced with an emphatic element of variety. Henry T. Einck instituted an ideal simile spiced with an emphatic element of variety. Henry T. Finck instituted an ideal simile some years ago when he observed that a dish of macaroni went into the mouth "every stick alike in shape and flavor." There are, indeed, melodic mannerisms in the mouth "every stick alike in shape and flavor." There are, indeed, melodic mannerisms himself. For a while they impress one as individual expressions. Subsequently they degenerate into wearisome formulas. For all the gorgeouness of harmonic investigation of the stick of the sti

yet the battered and wonderful old relic will still be found to speak with a sincerity will still be found to speak with a sincerity and a force of elemental passion unmatched by anything in Puccini. The brute force of "Tosca" is a different thing and in its way less convincing. Puccini can be affectingly poignant as in "Madama Butterfly," but he is never-nobly tragic. Nobility or losca is a different tining and in its way less convincing. Puccini can be affectingly poignant as in "Madama Butterfly," but he is never-nobly tragic. Nobility and true exaltation will, indeed, be sought in vain throughout the length and breadth of his operas. Nor has he the faculty of deep introspection. There are times when he, as Wagner said of Mendelssohn, "paints he, as Wagner said of Mendelssohn, "paints the appearance of a sentiment rather than the sentiment itself." Not once from "Le Villi" to the "Girl" has he laid bare a soul as relentlessly as did Wagner in the first four bars of "Tristan."

One hears occasional queries as to what is the "real" Puccini—whether the coarseness of certain passages of "Tosca" or the

is the "real" Puccini—whether the coarseness of certain passages of "Josea" or the rapturous though sometimes inflated lytiners of the properties of the special properties of the properties of influences from without rather than from inner necessities.

Puccini's Librettos

Puccini's sense of theatrical effectiveness is, as was remarked above, unerring. All are no anti-climaxes, no tedious lengths. The librettos that he has set are built with skill and judiciousness, if frequently crude skill and judiciousness, it requently crude in expression. The propriety of his selec-tion of subjects for musical treatment is a matter that is likely to entail controversy in the attempt to dispose of it one way or an-other. Certainly those who profess the bethe attempt to dispose of it one way or mother. Certainly those who profess the belief that the opera is primarily a form of poetic drama will find much to disconcert them in these works. Puccini has not hesitated to set to music things which would have caused many a greater man to pause line in "Butterly" has long been a classic of its kind. The first scene of the "Girl" abounds in matters, a good deal worse and neither "Bohème" nor "Tosca" can qualify as immune from similar unmiscal and unpoetic dross. Unhappily the effect of these massages when sing poetic dross. Unhappily the effect of these passages when sung on the stage and understood by the hearers is so ludicrous as understood by the hearers is so ludicrous as to prove only too potent an argument against the theories of those who discern in con-temporary life the only proper sphere of activity for the modern librettist and com-

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