

THE CARUSOS OF OTHER DAYS

How New York Opera Audiences of a Half-Century Ago Idolized Their Tenors—Brignoli's Famous Appetite—Memories of Victor Capoul—Theodore Wachtel's Vogue

By ROBERT GRAU

[First in a Series of Articles on Memories of Grand Opera in New York]

AFTER Caruso, who? Everywhere one may hear this query, but it was quite the same a decade ago, when Jean de Reszke's artistic career was nearing the end. The musical public of New York, as well as that of all the larger cities, always despaired of a successor to the idolized tenor of almost every operatic season since the advent of the great Mario at the old Academy of Music in 1854. But the impresarios of old were wont to come forth at the proper time with a sweet-voiced singer whose *Manrico* in "Trovatore" would atone for the illustrious tenor of yesterday, and if he could stand the test by reading the "high C" in "Di Quella Pira" all was well, but woe to him who failed in this test. No matter if he was a world's celebrity. To become the public's idol "Trovatore" must be the opera and *Manrico's* great aria the deciding point.

Mario came hither twice, though his second visit was greatly to be regretted and was wholly unnecessary. Max Strakosch thought that the glamor which illuminated so illustrious a figure would result in a triumph, but he made the mistake of bringing Mario here as the co-star with Carlotta Patti, a younger sister of Adelina Patti and one of the greatest coloratura singers of the nineteenth century.

The diva was then (1872) in her zenith, and when she sang with Mario the effect was disillusioning for the tenor whom many of the audience had heard twenty years before in the same auditorium. But Mario could still reach the "high C" in the "Trovatore" aria, and for this alone the public was reconciled to the spectacle of the now aged tenor, who at seventy-two could stand the crucial test.

It was quite the same with the great Spanish tenor Tamberlik, who came here at the end of his unexampled career and again it was difficult to comprehend the necessity of permitting the American public to hear him at all, but the story is worth the telling.

New York had its great opera wars in the early '70's, when the metropolis was a city of about one million inhabitants, and strangely enough the two opera houses were prosperous. Max Strakosch was presenting Nilsson, Cary, Campanini and Murel at the Academy and the indefatigable Max Maretzek, backed up by Colonel James Fisk, Jr., had Pauline Lucca, Ilma Di Murska and Tamberlik at the Grand Opera House on Eighth avenue.

These two Maxes were a strange species—one day engaged in a bitter combat for supremacy in the operatic field, the next day likely to be seen on Fourteenth street walking arm in arm, planning for an amalgamation of their forces in the hope that they might thus avoid the sheriff who was wont to play a vigorous rôle in operatic warfare of that day.

But to return to the tenors. After Mario and Tamberlik there came a protest from press and public alike. The favorite of the public at this time was the silver-voiced Brignoli, whose ungainly appearance was atoned for by his sensational rendering of the great aria from "Trovatore," and when "Brig" was hailed before the curtain a dozen or more times he would be forced to repeat the "high C" three or four times and then, still attired in *Manrico's* costume, he would sing as no other singer in the world's history ever did, his inimitable "Goot Py, Sveethart, Goot Py," and the vast audience would depart for their homes in heavenly ecstasy.

How Brignoli Coaxed His Appetite

Brignoli was a gross feeder. He was wont to dine at the Café Moretti, a none too elaborate restaurant directly opposite the stage door of the Academy. Here all the operatic stars of the '60's and '70's gathered for their spaghetti, and Moretti was relied upon to prevent any disastrous effects from overindulgence at his table, but with "Brig" he had to exercise more than the usual precaution. One day, when the tenor was to sing at night for the first time with Clara Louise Kellogg in "Martha," he came to Moretti in utter despair: "Caro Moretti, I am so miserable! I have no appetite and I sing *Lionel* to-night. What shall I do?" pleaded the tenor.

"I feet you," said the optimistic Moretti as he proceeded to the kitchen to prepare

for the broken-hearted tenor a mammoth omelette *aux fines herbes*, which he placed before the tenor, together with a dish of chicken salad which he insisted was calculated to revive the singer instantaneously.

Brignoli dispatched these tempting dishes with alacrity. When Moretti came to him inquiringly he pleaded that while he felt a *leelle* better he was still despairing for his appetite.

Once more Moretti assured the tenor that the next dish would have a magical effect, and then Brignoli could depart for the opera house. But alas! after stowing away a porterhouse steak that would have been ample for an ordinary family "Brig" still complained that while he felt much better his appetite was not what it should be.

Then Moretti brought forth his crowning triumph in culinary achievement—for Moretti's spaghetti was famous for creating appetite rather than satisfying it. To have seen Brignoli devour the elongated macaroni was a sight never to be forgotten. Moretti watched him from an invisible position behind a curtain and here the restaurateur hid two reporters who had been sent to look up the tenor and learn the cause of a rumor that he was not to appear that night with Kellogg.

Awaiting an opportune moment Moretti appeared before the tenor shouting "Bravo!" in approval of Brignoli's mastery over his failing appetite, but he was struck with consternation when his well-fed guest announced that now, having had his appetite restored, he would order his breakfast!

Memories of Victor Capoul

Perhaps the most popular tenor New York ever paid homage to was the French singer, Victor Capoul, who came hither almost unheralded, but who created a furor as *Faust*. Capoul, at his best, was really a great artist, but never was his voice of grand opera requirements, yet he was such a fine actor and presented so heroic a picture that he could be relied upon to fill the Academy to the doors, particularly at the matinées.

How great Capoul's popularity was may be best explained from the fact that though Nilsson was the star Strakosch used to announce the tenor's appearance in this fashion:

LAST CAPOUL NIGHT!
ONLY CAPOUL MATINÉE!!

With his small vocal resources Capoul made the most of everything favorable to himself. He sang with intense feeling, phrasing with such skill that it was truly a delight to listen to so consummate an artist. Yet men hated Capoul almost as much as women adored him. This was not due, however, to any lack of manliness on Capoul's part—merely the protesting against the idolizing of an artist. Yet Capoul was wholly indifferent to the great acclaim. Moreover, he strove to make a greater appeal on his merits, made an almost Herculean effort to become accepted for what he was.

To the late Maurice Grau, Capoul confided his woes, deploring his vogue, such as it was, and pleading that the impresario interest himself in his artistic career. The two became warm friends and my brother advised the broken-hearted artist to turn to opera-comique—his proper *forte*—to which suggestion Capoul promptly consented. For several years he sang such rôles as *Ange Pitou* in "La Fille de Mme. Angot" and *Wilhelm Meister* in "Mignon" with the Grau Opera Bouffe Company, headed by Paola Marie and Mlle. Angèle. For this procedure he succeeded in losing his prestige with women, for which he seemed to be very grateful, while the receipt of a weekly honorarium of \$1,000 and the knowledge that he was a source of profit to the impresario, whose friendship he greatly valued, served wholly to reconcile him to the new conditions.

Capoul's thin but musical voice finally gave way altogether. The last years of his public career witnessed an amazing display of versatility, appearing one season in comedy rôles at the Metropolitan, the next assuming the stage management of that institution, finally dividing his time between the direction of a small theater in Paris

and the conduct of a studio where more than one aspirant for operatic laurels was successfully launched on a career.

The spectacle of grand opera on the Bowery at \$5 per seat, while novel, was by no means unusual in the '70's. The Stadt Theater (Nos. 45 and 47 Bowery) was the largest theater in New York, and it was built on the lines of European opera houses. Here the illustrious Bogumil Darvison and his no less famous colleague, Frederick Haase, held sway to the delight of a public by no means confined to the Teutonic element, but the one great overshadowing event in the history of this noted playhouse was the advent of the much-heralded German tenor, Theodore Wachtel, who was the first male singer to come to this country to receive a nightly honorarium of \$1,000.

The Fame of Wachtel

But Wachtel would have been cheap at double the price. The Academy of Music in its palmiest days never saw such fashionable audiences and Wachtel drew to what was little more than an East Side wigwam. Speculators of that day reaped a harvest and I distinctly recall that when the advance sale opened the line began to form at sunset the day before; over two hundred persons remained in line all night and the spectacle of not a few women sitting on camp stools drinking hot coffee at six o'clock in the morning was surely an inspiring one. And yet this tribute to the tenor was as nothing compared to the scene in front of the old Bowery playhouse three hours later when the box office was finally opened.

An army of messenger boys had been detailed to the theater at different hours, each boy having been given a number and a duplicate number given to the prospective seat purchaser, who arrived at or before nine o'clock in the morning and upon payment of the messenger's fee the latter would relinquish his place. Over 250 carriages had reached the theater, all within less than half an hour. The excitement was indeed intense when, promptly at eight forty-five a. m. a detachment of police reserves marched to the front entrance and attempted to maintain an orderly line of seat buyers. But, alas! these were not the days of discipline and regularity in such matters and the many disconcerting instances of late-comers crowding out those who had waited all night for their opportunity created an inevitable riot. But evidence that speculators were in collusion with insiders forty years ago was clearly shown in the disgraceful scene which took place one hour after the box office opened.

Boston Fadettes "Walked Out" in Atlantic City

ATLANTIC CITY, N. J., Aug. 11.—August concerts by the Boston Fadettes in a series for the Atlantic City Exposition suffered interruption the other night when the women members of the orchestra, after assembling on the platform, turned around and walked out again. Suit has been opened against P. E. Lane, of the Exposition management for three weeks' salary. There was no previous warning of the intention of the Fadettes not to play, but as members of the Federation of American Musicians they were prevented from playing without recompense. They are now giving concerts at Apollo Theater, Atlantic City. Their leader is Beth Dinsmore and their manager Lillian White.

Numismatist Finds "Salome" Did "Seven Veil" Dance at Age of Eleven

That Mary Garden, Olive Fremstad and other operatic interpreters of *Salomé* could scarcely simulate childhood sufficiently to portray that dancing girl with historical accuracy is a deduction from recent study made by Theodore Reinach of the ancient coins of Nikopolis, the last king of which, Aristobulos, was the husband of the Strauss heroine. A study of the date of the coins convinces Mr. Reinach that *Salomé* was only eleven years old when she did the famous "Dance of the Seven Veils" before Herod.

Veteran Violin Maker Dies

BOSTON, Aug. 6.—Leonard O. Grover, eighty-five years old, who manufactured violins for many years, died yesterday. He is known as the maker of Ole Bull's violins. He began to fashion musical instruments at the age of thirteen. Later he obtained his wood from the old Chauncey Street Church, built in 1862. His varnish was a preparation of his own and he kept it secret.

To Please Kaiser, Officers Must Command on C Natural

BERLIN, Aug. 8.—Because the Kaiser has discovered that German army officers pronounce indistinctly when giving orders, some "swallowing" half their words and

at ten o'clock not a seat or box was to be had for Wachtel's first three appearances at the box office, and hundreds of brave, tired out men and women were informed of this fact before their turn had come.

Yet at the end of the line stood old Joe Seagrist, king of speculators, and "opera Charley," another of the same ilk, with their fists bulging with stacks of seats which they offered at from twenty-five to sixty dollars a pair.

In these days no grand opera enterprise was possible without the aid of Fred Rullmann, who held a mortgage over the heads of all the impresarios from Ullman (1850-1862) to Abbey (1883-1895). Rullmann was always relied upon to provide the deposit money that would assure the appearance in this country of any great celebrity and it was said that he and Tyson (who died a millionaire) furnished the \$25,000 necessary as security for the fulfillment of Wachtel's contract. Hence, while New York's opera-loving public was depriving itself of sleep and enduring great hardships in a legitimate desire to pay tribute to a great singer, more than one-half of the capacity of the theater—a total of 4,500 seats for the first three performances—was securely lodged in their hands the day before the sale opened.

An Indulgent Public

The New York *Herald* made an effort to resent this imposition on the part of the management and speculators alike, but as the *Herald* is still (in 1913) making the same effort and as the Rullmanns and Tysons have multiplied in four decades one must assume that after all the public is willing to be imposed upon.

Wachtel's début was one of those great nights that figure in New York musical history about once in every decade. His greatest rôle was in "Postillon du Longue-mean," an opera in which he alone was compelling, and no other tenor in my recollection could cope with the intricate and extremely difficult demands of the score. Wachtel was the supreme apostle of the "high C," and when he came forth as *Manrico*, in Verdi's "Trovatore," the excitement was so tremendous that the management was forced to announce that Wachtel would not depart until the public's desire to hear him was wholly satisfied, which surely was a procedure that the modern impresario would marvel at, for he is wont to favor the method of assuming that it is best to get all you can to-day by suggesting that to-morrow will be too late to hear the prevailing attraction at the opera house.

[To be continued next week]

all pitching their voices in various keys, they will now be required to shout their commands on C natural. Prof. Spiess was asked by the Kaiser to remedy the sounds he had been obliged to hear, so the former set to work, and after much experimenting with the scale determined that C natural would do for all the officers.

He Thanks Mephisto (Translated)

FORT WILLIAM HENRY HOTEL,
Aug. 5, 1913.

To the Editor of MUSICAL AMERICA:

I thank you most sincerely for the generous reference recently made of my little orchestra and its leader by "Mephisto."

I am heart and soul with you in the splendid campaign you are making to cause the efforts of each one in the musical field to be respected, no less than the splendid generosity of so many Americans toward the development of musical culture and taste.

With much respect,
E. ROSSETT.

Berlin Audience Hears American Soprano as "Isolde"

BERLIN, Aug. 9.—Phadrig Agon, a Louisville, Ky., soprano, who has been singing Wagnerian rôles with marked success in Moscow, Hamburg and Bremen, tonight appeared as *Isolde* in Kroll's Opera House. With the single exception of Nordica, Miss Agon is the only American who has braved this rôle before a Berlin audience. This singer is the wife of Prof. Grant, of Louisville.

The little boy in one of the forward pews touched his mother's elbow.

"Mamma," he whispered, "what makes the organist look so cross?"

"Sh, dear," cautioned the maternal parent; "he is playing an organ voluntary he doesn't like, perhaps, and one that he didn't know he would have to play."

That held the boy about ten seconds. Then he touched her elbow again.

"Then, mamma," he said, "it must be an organ involuntary he's playin'."—*Chicago Tribune*.