

LOOKING BACK AT OPERA OF 1863

Clara Louise Kellogg, "First American Prima Donna," Paints Retrospective Word Picture of Operatic Life in New York at Time of Civil War—Gounod's "Bold Harmonies" in "Faust" Astounding to That Public—Inoffensive "Traviata" Barred in Brooklyn Because of Its Immorality—Tenors that Savored of Lager Beer and Cheese

OPERA-LOVERS of 1913 may peer through the lorgnette of retrospection at operatic conditions as far back as the Civil War, mirrored in the reminiscences of the "first American prima donna, Clara Louise Kellogg, which are being published in the *Saturday Evening Post* under the title, "A Singer's Story." Particularly illuminating are her recollections of the men singers who played opposite to her. For instance, Mme. Kellogg Strakosch, as she is now, recalls that the famous Brignoli lived for his voice.

"He adored it," she explains, "as if it were some phenomenon for which he was in no sense responsible. He always took tremendous pains with his voice and the greatest possible care of himself. The story is told of him that one day he fell off a train. People rushed to pick him up, solicitous lest the great tenor's bones were broken. But Brignoli had only one fear. Without waiting even to rise to his feet, he sat up where he had fallen and solemnly sang a bar or two. Finding his voice uninjured he burst into heartfelt prayers of thanksgiving and climbed back into the car."

"My debut was in New York at the old Academy of Music," continues the singer, "and the part of *Rigoletto* was taken by the famous Ferri. He was blind in one eye, and I had always to be on his seeing side else he couldn't act. Stigelli was the tenor. Stiegel was his real name. He was a German and a really fine artist. Up to that time I had had no experience with stage heroes and thought they were all going to be exactly as they appeared in my romantic dreams, and—poor man, he is dead now, so I can say this—it was a dreadful blow to me to be obliged to sing a love duet with a man smelling of lager beer and cheese."

"Charlotte Cushman had always been interested in me. She reached the Academy in time for the last of *Rigoletto*, and I felt that I had been highly praised when, as I came out and began to sing, she cried: 'The girl doesn't seem to know that she has any arms!'"

Primitive Theater Conditions

"The handicaps of those days of crude and primitive theater conditions were really almost insurmountable. Of course, the audiences were correspondingly unexacting. Once during a performance of 'Il Barbiere' the man who was playing the part of *Don Basilio* sent his hat out-of-doors to be snowed on. When he wore it in the next act all white with snowflakes from the blizzard outside, the audience was so simple and childlike that it roared with pleasure, 'Why, it's real snow!'"

"The Italians of the chorus were always bitter against me, for up to that time Italians had had the monopoly of music. It was not generally conceded that Americans could appreciate, much less interpret, opera; and I, as the first American prima



Clara Louise Kellogg as She Appeared in the Sixties

donna, was in the position of a foreigner in my own country. The chorus indeed could sometimes hardly contain themselves. 'Who is she,' they would demand indignantly, 'to come and take the bread out of our mouths?'"

"This was a day and generation that found 'Faust' frightfully daring and 'Traviata' so improper that it required a year's hard effort to persuade the Brooklyn public to listen to it. It was really funny about 'Traviata.' In 1861 President Chittenden, of the board of directors of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, made a sensational speech arraigning the plot of 'Traviata' and protesting against its production in Brooklyn on the grounds of propriety, or rather impropriety. Meetings were held and it was finally resolved that the opera was objectionable. The feeling against it grew into a series of almost religious ceremonies of protest, and, as I have said, it took Grau a year of hard effort to overcome the opposition. When at last, in 1862, the opera was given I took part in it."

"I remember that I sang *Violetta* during one season with a tenor whose hands were always dirty. I found the back of my

pretty frocks becoming grimier and grimier and greasier and greasier, and, as I provided my own gowns and had to be economical, I finally came to the conclusion that I could not and would not afford to let this go on. So I sent my compliments to monsieur and asked him please to be extra careful and particular about washing his hands before the performance, as my dress was very light and delicate, and so forth—quite a polite message considering the subject. Politeness, however, was entirely wasted on him. Back came the cheery and nonchalant reply:

"All right! Tell her to send me some soap!"

"I sent it; and I supplied him with soap for the rest of the season. This was cheaper than buying new clothes."

"Tenors are often queer creatures. I used to find it in my heart, for instance, to wish that they did not have such queer theories as to what sort of food was good for the voice. Many of them affected garlic. Stigelli usually exhaled an aroma of lager beer; while the good Mazzoleni invariably ate from one to two pounds of cheese the day he was to sing. He said it strengthened his voice."

"Our second *Cobbler* in 'Crispino e la Comare' was Ranconi, who sang with me some years later when I gave English opera throughout the country. 'You know,' he said to me once, 'I'm a sly dog, a very sly dog indeed! When I sing off the key on the stage or do anything like that I always turn and look in an astounded manner at the person singing with me, as if to say, 'What on earth did you do that for?' and the other artist, perfectly innocent, invariably looks guilty. Oh, I'm a very sly dog!'"

Needed Magnet During Civil War

"While the Civil War was going on our opera ventures were nothing to what they had been in the days of peace. For a big success we needed something novel, sensational, exceptional. On the other side of the world people were all talking of Gounod's new opera, which had made a wonderful hit both in Paris and London. It was said to be startlingly new; and Max Maretzek, in despair over the many lukewarm successes we had all had, decided to have a look at the score. The opera was 'Faust.' With all my pride I was terrified when he came to me and abruptly told me that I was to create the part of *Marguerite* in America."

"You who have grown to regard the opera of 'Faust' as old-fashioned and of light weight must refocus your glass a bit and look at Gounod's masterpiece from the point of view of nearly fifty years ago. It was just as startling, just as strange, just as antagonistic to our established musical habit as Strauss and Debussy and Dukas are to some persons to-day. Gounod's bold harmonies, sweeping airs and curious orchestration were upsetting to the public ears. The musicians picked it to pieces, of course, and so did the critics. The public came, however, packing the house to more than its capacity. People paid seven and eight dollars a seat to hear that opera, an unheard-of thing in those days."

Interpolating Patriotic Airs

"We often took wicked liberties with operas, such as introducing the 'Star-

Spangled Banner' and similar patriotic songs into the middle of Italian scores. But nothing could give any one so clear an idea of the universal acceptance of this custom of interpolation as the following criticism, printed during our second season: 'The production of "Faust" last evening by the Maretzek troupe was excellent indeed. But why, oh why, the eternal Soldiers' Chorus? Why this everlasting, tedious march, when there are so many excellent band pieces on the market that would fit the occasion better?'"

"My general impressions of this period of my life include those of the two great pianists, Thalberg and Gottschalk. Gottschalk was a gay Lothario and women were crazy about him. He was pursued by adoring women wherever he went, and inundated with letters from girls who had lost their hearts to his exquisite music and magnetic personality. I shall always remember Gottschalk and Brignoli comparing their latest love letters from matinee girls. Some poor, silly maiden had written to Gottschalk asking for a meeting at any place he would appoint. Said Gottschalk:

"It would be rather fun to make a date with her at some absurd, impossible place, say a ferryboat, for instance."

"Nonsense," said Brignoli, "a ferryboat is not romantic enough. She wouldn't think of coming to a ferryboat to meet her ideal!"

"She would come anywhere," declared Gottschalk, as one stating a simple truth. 'I'll make her come. And you shall come, too, and see her do it!'"

"Will you bet?" asked Brignoli.

"I certainly will," replied Gottschalk.

"They promptly put up quite a large sum of money and Gottschalk won. That dear, miserable goose of a girl did go to the ferryboat to meet the illustrious pianist of her adoration, and Brignoli was there to see."

Bad Manners of London Operagoers Due to Lack of Reverence for Art

Answering a German's complaint as to the bad behavior of late comers to the opera in London, Filson Young, the English writer, explained: "My German friend, the determination of Britons 'never, never to be slaves' is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in their refusal to submit to discipline of any kind in the cause of art. With us art is still a department of pleasure, and not by any means the most important department. That is the sole explanation of our bad manners in theaters and operas. If a manager were really to be strict he would offend the public, which, although it does not care very much, makes the whole performance possible. Every nationality has its particular *gaucheries*; this is one of ours."

Plan to Check Suggestive Songs by a Public Library of Good Music

CHICAGO, Aug. 26.—Plans for an effective check on the suggestive songs that pour into the homes of Chicago residents have been outlined by Henry E. Legler, librarian of the Chicago Public Library. The plan is the establishment of a circulating library of the best music, this to be conducted as a department of the public library. The idea received the endorsement of Dr. Max Henius, vice-president of the library board.

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