

MUSICAL ASPIRANTS AS THE CONCERT DIRECTOR SEES THEM

Holding the Mirror up to the Artistic Nature as Observed in Audition before a Manager — Lack of Self-Criticism a General Defect—Classification of Those Soliciting Engagements — Instances of Deluded Singer and Drug Fiend Genius

By EASTWOOD LANE

THE dictionary gives several definitions of the word "secretary," one of which states, among other things, that a secretary is an article of furniture. I am a secretary in the office of a well-known metropolitan concert director, and while not exactly an article of furniture, I am more or less wooden-faced. Long experience has toned down the lustre of any veneer or polish that I may have formerly possessed into an exterior so forbidding that it is impossible for portal supplicants to see any reflection of their own artistic finish. Being wooded-faced, all underlying emotions such as the desire to shriek, the inclination to giggle, or a tendency to weep from sheer sympathy are concealed from the sharpest scrutiny. Now the duties of a secretary are many and wanton. Among the more important is the ability upon occasion to evince a three-fold stupidity while employing extraordinary acumen; to become when necessary a liar as clearly defined as one who might venture to express a difference of opinion with Mr. Roosevelt personally; to answer sweetly and with apparent zest the same question repeated with a maddening iteration many times a day, and to be an adept in the gentle art of "stalling."

I do not find the word "stall" defined in the dictionary in the modern or metropolitan sense, so I shall hazard a definition of my own making; a "staller" is one who procrastinates either for personal or

an employer's reasons, and who in so doing creates a sense of gratitude in the individual "stalled" for favors he has not yet received but hopes for. Continued amicable relations among human beings is becoming more and more impossible without a training in the nuances of this art.

Stalling usually involves prevarication, which in turn becomes the favorite mode of expression in the course of a concert season. Like Clyde Fitch's heroine in *The Truth*, I am apt to lie from choice rather than necessity. Usually this is accompanied by no harrowing qualms of conscience; on the other hand, I sense a certain inward complacent glow when I fan into flame the fading spark of self-esteem in some poor damsel who has released her tortured soul in the "Meditation" or who has sybillantly whispered "Will o' the Wisp" to the delight of an imaginary audience and the relief of the accompanist, who knows, like the dog that bit his tail with suicidal intent, that this is the end.

During the eight active months comprising the concert season many call but few are chosen. Not one applicant in fifty given an audition ever evinces talent which will warrant hope of their arriving in the broader sense, yet hope remains with them as persistently as with a consumptive.

Illusions Destroyed

It has been my observation that vocalists retain their illusions longer than instrumentalists. They seem to lack critical introspective qualities. I have heard highly intelligent persons—individuals blessed supposedly with a fair sense of humor, but of ordinary vocal ability—refer continually in tones of profound respect and consideration to their voice and all the technical minutiae remotely connected with its functions and culture. To venture a criticism of the voice of such a person other than favorable would be to incur their everlasting resentment. A clear case of "Love me, love my song."

Yet this lack of ability for self-criticism is not confined entirely to singers. During an audition which occurred the beginning of last season a lad played the violin for me in a most musicianly fashion. His tone and technique for one of his age showed remarkable development, and he revealed a talent bordering on genius, despite the handicap of an obviously inferior instrument.

His number was followed by a couple of singers, after which another violinist, a woman, essayed the "Zigeunerweisen," that celebrated display piece for the violin, which she played until she finished

—literally. Later in the course of a conversation with her I asked her what she thought of the boy's playing. "Well enough," she said, "but I do not care for his method of bowing." Then she calmly quoted me her lowest price for a public appearance. Instinctively there occurred to me the Golbergian wail, "It's all wrong!"

People soliciting appointments with the concert director with a view to possible engagement may be divided by sexes into two classes. I pass by an opportunity to introduce a time-honored jest relative to the epicene quality of tenors. The female class may be subdivided roughly (yet without Pankhurstian violence) into the cock-sure, the truculent, the violently partisan friend, the wildly eccentric, with an occasional real musician. To these one might add the lady ambassadors calling in the interests of sequestered and carefully nurtured tenors.

The last mentioned type is perhaps the most deadly. In the presence of one of these I am made to feel the gravity of the situation at once. I stare as one hypnotically fascinated squarely into the eyes of this splendid material for a book agent with an assumption of vast interest, while she extolls the Caruso-like quality of this blushing, as yet unseen tenor. Watching carefully when she takes breath, I attempt a wedgelike verbal interruption of her glowing panegyric in the hope of damming or derailing it, but get no further than such bromidically futile remarks as "Yes, madame," "Is it possible?" etc. Physically glued to the spot, but minus my wits, which long since have slipped their moorings, I am only brought back to earth by the jarringly straight to the point question: "How much do you intend paying him?" This before either the concert director or myself have heard a single one of his alleged thrush-like tones!

Visits from Mentally Deficient

A famous French philosopher once made the malevolently acute remark that "there is something in the misfortunes of our best friends not entirely displeasing to us." The truth of this is shown in our barbaric enjoyment of the mentally deficient. The footlights of the concert stage exercise unusual fascination for numerous cerebral "not-at-homes" possessed of fantastic talents and innumerable schemes for the entertain-

ment and enlightenment of an insatiable and sophisticated public. I have encountered many such.

Of late much has been written and commented upon regarding incompetent and unprincipled teachers of music, who continually bleed pupils of little or no talent, trading on their credulity by depicting in rainbow hues a roseate future for them in concert or grand opera. Personal experiences have led me to believe that this sort of charlatan is an unpleasant reality who will continue in his predaceous ways until both pupils and the teaching profession are protected by proper legislation.

Recently a young lady called upon me accompanied by a sweet-faced elderly woman, whom I learned later was her mother, and asked to see the concert director. She informed me that she was a pupil of Signor X. and that she wished an audition with her mother present just to show what other authorities besides her teacher thought of her voice, which, she confided modestly, was a soprano of remarkable range, brilliancy and power. "In fact," she said, "I am going abroad with Signor X. and his wife to study for three years more, and then I shall take up grand opera, singing leading roles."

At this point her mother took up the conversation. "Yes," she said, "Father and I don't want to be in the way or interfere where Janey's voice is concerned. We have a little farm out West which Janey can have, or anything else we've got, to advance herself in her studies. I wish you could just hear her once."

Her Face Not Her Fortune

I explained to her that I frequently heard people sing in the absence of the concert director, and that I should be pleased to give her daughter, who had brought an accompanist, an audition. Inwardly I was curious to listen to a voice that would be singing operatic rôles in three years. It was apparent to me that if this girl plucked the laurel wreath and became a corset indorser or acted as god-mother to a brand of cold cream it would be through her voice alone. O. Henry once told of a girl whose "system of beauty would make a July magazine poster look like the cook on a Monongahela River coal barge," but this was not the girl he meant. This young woman's hours for study would never be cut into

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