

THE FUTURE OF OPERA IN AMERICA

Lessons to Be Learned from the Manner in Which Charlottenburg Established Its Opera House
—The Real Reason for the Failure of Popular Opera in This Country—Some American Singers Who Have Not Had Their Due Here

(Second Article)

By DR. P. J. GRANT

I HAVE spent several years in Europe. Since my return to the home land I have unconsciously—though not willingly—looked upon conditions here with the eyes of a European. Things which formerly I regarded quite in the nature of things to-day strike me as beyond endurance.

We are in many ways a nation without order, a people who seem to have taken for our motto "*Laissez faire*"—in other words, the policy of let well enough alone.

In spite of our enormous wealth, the return does not justify the energy spent. As it is in the commercial, so it is in the

artistic and cultural world of America.

We have spent not millions but billions. Does the result justify the outlay? I do not think so. We have sporadic, spasmodic and periodic efforts at uplift—social, moral, cultural and artistic—but in the end they have come to naught. They lack union, co-ordination, and above all, subordination. Everyone wants to be colonel, when his or her best work could be done in the ranks.

We lack the broad spirit, both of generosity and of outlook; we are too selfish; we are too much in the present and not enough in the future; we look too much for immediate results, and give up in despair when they do not materialize.

We have in the city of New York one of the greatest museums of art in the world. What proportion of New York's population has been within its doors? What effort has been made to induce it to enter?

It is the same old story with regard to the Museum of Natural History.

I spent the greater part of our great national holiday there. Ninety-five per cent of the visitors were foreigners, who spoke a foreign language! The only Americans there were the guards, and they were there because they were paid to stay. The great New York public was contemplating the artistic glories of Coney Island and kindred places of culture.

Am I to believe that the foreigner cares more for the contents of these museums than the American? Not for a moment. It is simply that no great systematized and sustained effort has been made to gain his attention and sympathy. In Europe it is quite otherwise.

The art of Greece was not made in a day; neither was that of Italy, France or Holland. Art feeds and grows on appreciation, but the appreciation must be sought, and sought continuously. It will not come spontaneously.

Here, I think, you have in a nutshell the disastrous failure of the Century Opera Company. It was not the fault of the directors; it was not the fault of the artists; nor was it the fault of the public. The enterprise was doomed to failure from the first, because no sustained and systematized effort was made to gain the sustained sympathy and support of the public. True, the enterprise received lots of publicity, but the publicity was of the wrong kind. The burden of its support was left to a few rich men. The great middle-class public with modest incomes was not appealed to in the proper spirit. The appeal should, first of all, have been educational. If the public could have been persuaded that the movement was in every way for its benefit I feel sure that the financial support would really have been forthcoming. A few competent lecturers engaged to speak before the almost innumerable women's clubs, musical societies and kindred organizations of New York would, I believe, have worked wonders.

I believe these organizations would courteously and in a most sympathetic manner have received these lecturers, and would willingly have pledged their financial support. But the effort should not

have stopped with the clubs; it should have been extended to our great educational institutions—Columbia University, the College of the City of New York and our very numerous high and private schools.

Need of Educational Campaign

I place the lack of this educational campaign as one of the great reasons for the failure of popular opera in the past. We must beyond question make use of it if we are to make opera a success in the future.

I said in my last article that I did not think it possible to make popular opera (or, as it is called in Germany, "Volksooper"—opera for the people) successful in New York. I think I must retract that. Since writing it I have had an opportunity of talking with men and women in different walks of life—physicians, lawyers, artists, clubwomen and women who do not belong to clubs, all cultured men and women, most of them college graduates.

I found them all without exception fond of good music in any form, but most of all in operatic form; but they were people of modest means, who could not afford to pay Metropolitan opera prices. A great many of them were frankly and most strongly opposed to the Metropolitan because they believe that in its present form it is subversive of our democratic ideals. In my talks with them and in their expression of their opinions I found the seed of hope.

What must we do to crystalize this opinion to make of it a living actual force?

Let me take Charlottenburg as an example.

Charlottenburg bears somewhat the same relationship to Greater Berlin as the Bronx—or, let us say, West New York, from Seventy-second Street north—does to Greater New York.

The residents of Charlottenburg were dependent on the Royal Opera House for their opera. The Royal Opera House seats about 2,000, and the demand for seats was nearly double that of the seating capacity. That meant that the Charlottenburger had to rise early, stand in line for several hours (it was not uncommon to see them lined up at seven o'clock in the morning before the ticket office), only to be turned away in the end with the curt word "Ausverkauft."

Opera a Necessity in Berlin

Now, your Charlottenburger, like every other German, will do without a great many things (even his beer), but he can't and he won't get along without opera. The situation was intolerable, and there was only one remedy—Charlottenburg must have an opera of its own! What did they do? Did they go hat in hand to some millionaire and, going on

their knees, beg him to build it? No, indeed!

There are no Carnegie Libraries in Germany. Its libraries have been built by the people. The citizens got to discussing the matter; then they became indignant; then they got mad, boiling mad, and when a German gets mad don't argue with him if he wants the sidewalk; give it to him. Take to the street; you'll have more room there!

They called a public meeting. A committee of one or two hundred prominent citizens was appointed. Large posters bearing the names of the committee were posted on the billboards and in the subway stations; circulars were mailed to everyone—even the working people. They asked for promises of subscriptions—not toward a building, but for seats. Then the committee, having obtained all the promises, went to the city authorities, and the city authorities voted the money, and the opera house was built (within the year), but not without opposition.

Royal Opera Rivalry

The Royal Opera did not want a rival; every obstacle was placed in the way; building and police laws were invoked. It looked like a case of the "irresistible force and the immovable object," and contrary to all physical laws, the irresistible force—the German citizen—won out!

We have an irresistible force here, the decent-minded American who abhors snobbery and all its works—whose will be the master mind to set it spinning?

The People's Opera of Charlottenburg has been a success from the opening night until the present—not for twenty-two weeks, but for ten months of the year, every night of the week, Sunday included, and Charlottenburg's population is well under a half-million.

Of course, you won't see many dress suits, and the diamonds displayed wouldn't fill a teacup, but it is a cultured audience nevertheless. Talk in English to your neighbor on your right, and he will answer you in English; in French to your neighbor on your left, and he will answer you in French.

Really, for a large proportion of the audience opera in the vernacular is not so necessary after all. And the artists? All native! There is not a foreigner among them! That was the rule laid down by the opera committee, so Director Hartmann told me. "But," I answered, "you have one American."

"We thought the artist was a German when we engaged her; but the mistake will not occur again."

The architecture of the house is not imposing. In my humble opinion it is plain even to ugliness, but they got what they wanted—a comfortable home for popular opera. They were not asking for a palace.

Can we do the same here? Most certainly. I have neither fear nor doubts. As one very prominent clubwoman said to me, "We have been doing some very deep thinking during the last year, and we are growing discontented, not to say disgusted with conditions as they are. We are all heartily in favor of an American opera, with American singers, and above all, with an American director, but what we want, and want badly, is a leader—somebody who will show us the way. Why do not John C. Freund and his MUSICAL AMERICA take up the mat-

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