

"All Would Be Prima Donnas—But Do They Realize What It Means?"—Schumann-Heink

A Chapter from Her Own Life Tells of the Infinite Struggle, the Self-Restraint Which Alone Can Lead to Success—Noted Diva in Heart-to-Heart Talk Reveals Her Philosophy as to Life and Art—What the Coming of Peace Has Brought Her

BY CLARE PEELER

THE room was streaming with sunshine and bright with colors. On the rack of the open piano was a manuscript song; on a nearby chair, a music-portfolio exuding sheet music; on one table three photographs of young men in uniform; on another, a copy of MUSICAL AMERICA. A smiling maid welcomed me courteously, giving first aid to furs and coat, and indicating the most comfortable chair. Presently the door into the bedroom opened and the kindest, brightest woman's face, framed in a mass of fresh-groomed silver-gray hair, appeared in the opening.

"Excuse me that I keep you waiting," the owner said. "It is my hair; I just have it washed. I come to you in a moment."

When I had last seen the speaker, she had been the center of attention and applause at the Hippodrome, crowded to the roof and Major-General Bell had led the cheering after her singing of "When the Boys Come Home." For this was Schumann-Heink's apartment at the Waldorf; and it was the singer herself that had greeted me in that unceremonious fashion that was yet so full of the finest courtesy.

They have all been used long ago often in speaking of her; those adjectives such as "genial," "splendid," "greathearted," "lovable," and "motherly," the one word she loves to hear applied to her, the one that instinctively springs to one's lips in speaking of her, how many times has that been said or written in speaking of the famous contralto? I am not going to make use of one of them; I am only going to record my impression that last week I met a very great person. Others eminent in her profession, both men and women, one meets often; but only once or twice is it given to one to be overawed by the sheer force of an entity, irrespective of any place in the world's honor or art belonging to the individual.

Of Heroic Mould

This is one who, perhaps, could not be little if she tried; a woman cast in heroic mould of soul as of body. Of such, you feel, were the women who have lived in poetry, in drama and in history as the great figures. She need not have been a singer, this woman; she might have been a Brunnhilde, splendid in her self-immolation; or a Semiramide, magnificent in ambition, stern in justice. But if she had lived and died a charwoman, she would not have been little in the mind's or the soul's sense. She lives in big figures. The landscape of her thought has mountain vistas. If her anger against wrongdoing is Titanic, her tenderness for the wronged, the suffering, the bereaved, is colossal. Small words can not describe her feelings or their expression of them. Life has been kind to her in that it has endowed her with a splendid physique for the housing of her musical genius; but it has also given her the intense feeling, the quivering sensitiveness of the music-soul.

Then picture such a soul swept by the tremendous currents of feeling that the last three years have released into the world. Yet hers is not a soul storm-tossed from its moorings; it is one guide by the steersman of Duty, in the strongest sense of that word; by a loyalty which is in so far easy in that it is a loyalty to a land that long ago won her passionate gratitude and love. But such an agony as can only be felt by the artist-soul, doubled and redoubled by the intensity of a mother-love that is more than a characteristic, that is a religion, has been hers.



Ernestine Schumann-Heink, the Contralto Whose Name Is a Household Word. Right: Mme. Schumann-Heink with the Photographs of Her Soldier-Sons

"When peace came," she said, "I could not laugh; I could not cry; I could not even pray. I could only whisper the name of God, who understands."

When such a personality gives itself heart and soul to a cause, its power is a tremendous one; and the full force of Mme. Schumann-Heink's being is in the cause of the American soldier, "the boy," as she calls him. Hers is no hysteria, generated by the enthusiasm of an unoccupied moment; it is no calculated admiration, manufactured for selfish purpose; it is not even an affection originating in the personal feeling of the mother who has given four sons to a country. It is a fervor that is religious, that is rooted in the sense of duty and love of a being whose whole radiation is duty and love. It is a storm of love raised in the soul of a woman who is woman raised to the Nth power; who counts as her sons not only those born of her, but those of lovingest adoption, and so numbers them not by tens or twenties, but by thousands and tens of thousands.

She saw those men—she will not call them anything but boys—when they were first housed in their roughly-built shacks; she has seen the shacks change into miles of buildings, provided with every comfort that the United States' immense resources could pay for, and the minds of her organizers suggest. So she has seen the boys change from the awkward, raw, unskilled recruits into a magnificently drilled army. (And she has heard and seen them change from an unmusical into a singing army.)

"Think of it!" she says, her dark eyes blazing with the fire of her thought. "They had no training; they were nothing; they went up against that other magnificently-equipped army. And they could not fail. Why? Because that splendid—what you call it?—impressionableness of them, that wonderful receptiveness—it made them take in in months what other races had to learn in years."

American Music First

At last, to the topic of music. Of American music, she will speak first, of the music of Chadwick, of Nevin, of Speaks, of Luckstone, of Foster, of Carrie Jacobs-Bond (whom she knows and well loves), of Mrs. H. H. A. Beach. She has sung the music of all these composers over and over again; and in them she finds the vivid quality of national being; a something, yet to be recognized, that shall be ultimately invincible. The love of the American for the "popular" song, (decried even by his own race in many instances, as meaning a lack of culture), this woman, all musician, translates into

the terms of the higher democracy; as a love of melody of the sort that shall be understood of the people. Not that it is possible for an artist trained in her early career by Brahms himself—permeated with that music-feeling which is the heritage of the countrywoman of Mozart, to understand the value, indeed the absolute necessity of such a groundwork of training even in minutest detail as shall be a foundation for the higher culture. Only she has so fine a vision that she sees past the outer the inner, so big an outlook that she can see through the present into the future of American music and American composers.

She believes that the ghost of the "foreign education" has been finally laid; that the haunting specter of "European atmosphere" has been ultimately exorcised; that from now on America has truly come into her own.

"If you had signed 'Franz Schubert' to 'The Rosary' it would have been known and loved much sooner than it was," she said. "But that is past now, all of it. All these things that you demand so rightly in your paper for America, the according of good rank to the American composer who shall deserve it; the municipal opera houses; the recognition of the American singer; all this has come, will come, mark my words. But we must work; the American must lay, painstakingly, the same foundation that his foreign brother laid before he can aspire to pre-eminence."

For Young Singers

"It is so, especially with the young singer. All would be prima donnas, but they do not realize what it means to be a prima-donna? Think once. I began singing at sixteen; did I call myself a prima-donna? I took any part that they would give me. I had the voice, so I knew, but I had to learn music in detail. I used to sing all my parts by ear; I learned to read anything written, and read it fast. How I worked! Fine clothes, parties, amusements, good things to eat, good things to drink—these were not for her who would be a prima-donna. Even if my poverty had not denied them to me, they were not for me. And now I am glad from my heart that I understood that. For, what have I now as a result of these years of toil? Not only the success, but I have the knowledge that I did my duty; not only that I won the place I had longed for, but that I had worked well and faithfully. And so these others who want success must do. There must not be the feeling that all is gained after a few initial successes; and above all, not this wasting of the voice."



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"I learned in my youth how to economize what the good God had given me; that is why, after forty-one years of hard singing, I have my voice left."

"Then it is not true, as is sometimes said, that the contralto voice has a more lasting quality than the soprano, other things being equal?"

"No, my dear," she said, kindly. "It is all contained in the knowledge first, how to sing; second, how to economize your voice; third, how to live healthily, happily, wisely. Let you have your voice to begin with, and live up to those rules, and your voice will last, no matter what its register."

The Contralto's Place

"They say, 'there are so few contralto roles.' Well, I found enough of them to keep me busy in my operatic career! But the contralto must not turn herself into a soprano. She must be artist, she must know what her place is in the musical scheme; a place none can take from her; she must keep to it and do her part well."

We spoke of some of the earlier days; of the time when the great contralto was a part of the galaxy, now only a memory, in which Sembrich and Nordica, Plancon and Bispham, the de Reszkes and Eames shone. And then we came back to the subject of reconstruction work, and of the help a singer might give therein; for, with a son just returned to her from his navy service a day before, it was not possible to keep long from the subject of the soldier.

"All I fear is, that America may forget," she said, the tears of intense feeling in her eyes. "That in a year we may be saying, 'Yes, those poor wounded fellows; isn't it dreadful? I tell you, Schumann-Heink will not forget! It is not enough to say, 'I did help them all I could,' 'I will help them all I can,' 'I do help them all I know.' I tell you, my dear, I would die to aid them. And I mean it."

In that moment all the temperament spoke of her who has sung *Dalila's* wooing and *Ortrud's* ambition; who has voiced the defiance of *Fricka* and the despair of *Azucena*. And it was not a mere declamation. When she returns to her beloved California, she will take with her (at her own special request to the military authorities) three wounded and one blind soldier, to spend the winter in the beauty and the comfort of her home. To know what comforting in the best sense will be theirs, one only has to look at Schumann-Heink's face when she speaks of those who suffer.

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