

HOW MILTON ABORN BATTLED FOR AMERICAN OPERA

Veteran Impresario Who Made "Dollar Opera in English" Famous Recalls Pioneer Days for "Musical America" in Commemoration of His Thirty-fifth Anniversary in the Operatic Field—Stage-Struck Drummer Who Wanted to Become Singer Established Chain of Opera Companies—Championed High Artistic Standards and Fought for the Use of English—"Discovered" Eminent Artists—How Opera Created Native Vaudeville—To Erect Great "Musical Building" in New York

By ALFRED HUMAN

DOLLAR opera is dead but Milton Aborn, creator of Abornized Verdi, Mascagni, Wagner, *et al.*, is still with us after thirty-five exciting years in the American operatic arena.

The sad reasons for the passing of the Age of Dollar-Opera-in-English will be explained in the proper place; in the meanwhile let us examine the thirty-five-year record of the California drummer whose yearnings to follow in the *Mefistophelean* footsteps of Edouard de Reszke created a new era of American opera.

Quite accidentally we learned last week from Dr. Frank Nagel that Milton Aborn had just reached his thirty-fifth anniversary. So we coralled the man of the snowy-white Mont Blanc hair in the antechamber of the Aborn Miniature Theater, which is located a hundred paces from the majestic Broadway temple of art. (Yes, you have guessed it, the Metropolitan.) A *Michaela* was going through her paces on the stage to the accompaniment of a very animated ten-fingered orchestra. Milton the First of Dollar-Opera-in-English docilely conducted us to headquarters, seated us amid stacks of morocco-bound "Fausts," "Carmens," "Cavallerias," Wagner scores (Newman and Corder translations), closed the door on Bizet's grieving *ingenue*, and bid us fire away.

If we were a lady interviewer we would devote a whole paragraph to the luster of the argent mane, another paragraph to the esthetic mold of our subject's features, the solemn mien—the mask of nature's own humorists—but we are not and we wont.

"You have developed many an artist, Mr. Aborn?"

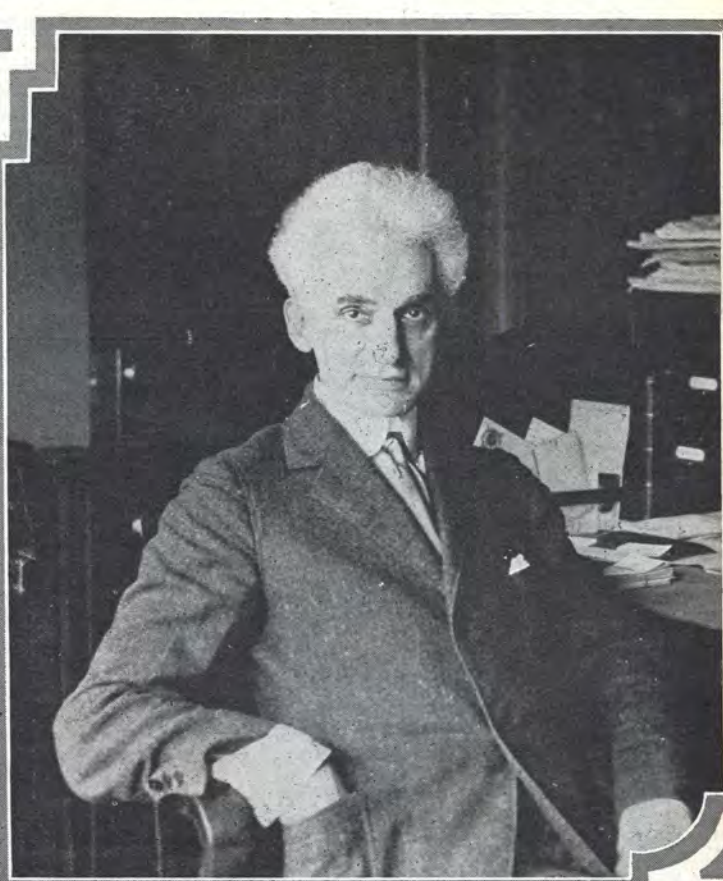
Launched Many Notables

"Perhaps next year we'll hold a reunion. There's Mabel Garrison, Lila Robeson, Thomas Chalmers, Elsie Janis, Marguerite Clark, Marie Dressler, to mention a few names at random from the musical and theatrical fields. We ought to have a pleasant reunion, these young people whom I had the honor of launching on their careers, and myself. You want me to begin at the very beginning?"

"I was born in California fifty-five years ago, in Marysville. But as I have never been to California since I don't suppose I am a Californian in the full sense of the word. My father went West during the gold rush but later on our folks settled down in the East. If I have any humor in me at all I inherited it from my father. He was a gifted singer as well as a 'comedian' in the fine sense of the word, and he saw to it that all of his youngsters studied piano and singing.

The Romance of "Drumming"

"From the beginning, I had the urge



Photos by The Illustrated News

Milton Aborn, After Thirty-five Years in the Operatic Field. Upper Left, as a Conductor; Right, at His Desk in His Miniature Theater Building; Below, Rehearsing "The Mikado"

to do something out of the ordinary. At that time it was the highest ambition of most boys to follow the fascinating travelling life of the commercial drummer. But selling ordinary merchandise seemed too prosaic for my romantic imagination, so I looked around for a more stimulating commodity. I finally decided on spool-cotton, the product of the snowy-white blossoms of the South. As a result of this decision I married a girl from the Cotton State of Mississippi—but I am ahead of my story.

"My career as a drummer began when I was sixteen, a big, strapping lad who looked several years older. The excitement of other cities (our home was in Boston), and, above all, those hours of story-telling provided an entertaining and valuable three years' experience. Every drummer had to be a good joke-teller, and as I had a strong predilection for such pleasantries I acquired a certain technique in the art. When I found that my efforts were more than unusually successful, as I thought, I longed and sighed for the opportunity of publicly displaying this training.

Stage-Struck!

"Selling spool-cotton lost its charm. I thought of nothing but the stage, I dreamt of nothing but the stage. Every-

where I watched for an opening, but no manager seemed to have any sympathy with my ambitions. Then I decided I would have to capture a place in the theater by storm. I assembled a company in Boston, rehearsed them, and after a couple of weeks' rehearsal produced Audran's "Mascot" in a hall on Boylston Street. This was on Feb. 3, 1884, when I was nineteen years old. This performance had the desired effect, for soon afterward I was engaged for a "Pinafore" production as *Sir Joseph Porter*. We played in the Windsor Theater, located at Dover and Washington Streets. Then I was made principal comedian and stage manager of the company at a salary of \$15 a week. During this period my ambition to sing in grand opera was never quenched so I applied myself assiduously to *Mefisto* in Gounod's "Faust." However, when I heard myself sing the rôle I became scared at the sound of my own voice and resolved to keep to the lighter side of opera. My first engagement came to a sudden end several weeks later, when we were stranded at Brockton, Mass.

When Opera Chastened "Variety"

"At this time the form of entertainment known as 'variety' was in a precarious state from a genteel standpoint.

E. F. Albee, who conceived the idea of elevating the standard of the 'variety,' had a pianist, Earle Bishop, in his Boston theater. Mr. Albee had the idea that opera would lend dignity to the performances and therefore attract the better kind of audiences. Mr. Bishop, who was the pianist who played when I made my debut, recommended me to Mr. Albee as a likely man to produce opera, and later, after being examined by Mr. Albee, I was engaged at the princely salary of \$35 a week. I was immediately shipped to the Gaiety Theater at Providence. On the site of this little building, by the way, Mr. Albee has only recently completed his million dollar theater. I was supposed to give three performances a day, but on the very first day of my engagement we had to give five performances of 'The Mascot' in honor of St. Patrick's Day.

"In all I was with Keith for nine years, from '84 to '92. I played *Ko-ko* in the 'Mikado' and leading rôles in the fifty or sixty other light operas we produced during this period. Those were the days of whirlwind performances. On holidays we would give a Gilbert and Sullivan work or other pieces from our wide repertoire seven times. Many a time

[Continued on page 4]