

"LET SIMPLICITY BE THE COMPOSER'S CONSTANT OBJECTIVE, ADJURES ITALO MONTEMEZZI

The Great Composer of "L'Amore dei Tre Re" Pays His First Visit to America—A Study of the Man and His Ideals—Ambition and a Twenty-Dollar Piano—Orchestration Mastered without Texts or Teachers—"La Nave" a "Larger Work than 'Tre Re'"

His face calls to mind pictures of the early Berlioz. As much as the gauntness of feature and frame, the cold and tranquil demeanor suggest an origin other than Latin. The seamed cheeks and brow, the angularity of high cheek bones, the long and sharp-pointed nose, the tight-drawn, thin lips and strong jaw no less than the impressive stature, spare figure and looseness of limb, cunningly counterfeit the New England farmer. A wavy shock of hair, streaked with spreading grayness, terminates the broad forehead. Under shaggy eyebrows burn eyes penetrating without sharpness, eyes that seem now to contemplate remote perspectives and anon, are blithely alert to the matter of the moment. He is thirty-nine, they say. He looks more. His life has been, in the superficial sense, uneventful. Yet, his countenance, like one of Gilbert's idealistic personages, "wears sorrow's interesting trace."

I met Italo Montemezzi with a sense of hero-worship. To know the man has been a dear ambition of mine since that January morning, six years ago, when I sat, shaken but transported, through the last rehearsal of "L'Amore dei Tre Re" in the darkened and empty auditorium of the Metropolitan. I have never ceased to love that work as an almost perfect art product and to esteem it as the sole pure power of musical inspiration blooming in Italy since the world looked first upon the rugged and tragic mien of "Otello" and joyed in the glistening frivolities of "Falstaff". Admiration has increased fifty-fold with acquaintance. Surely the person who had power to create the riches of this ideally proportioned and glowingly conceived score must be of utterly uncommon distinction. Such the logical surmise. Yet little appeared to be known of him. There was talk of his timidity. During the war rumors varied. He was in retirement, writing a lyrical tragedy on all manner of topics. Conjecture ranged all the way from Julius Caesar to a romantic French subject. Conjecture, as usual, was amiss.

Montemezzi has the simplicity of greatness. As we talked of this and of that in his tenth floor room at the Biltmore a day or two after he landed I could not refrain from reverting mentally to another occasion some eight years back, briefly previous to the "Girl of the Golden West." I visited Puccini then in his suite at the Knickerbocker. A score of the new opera stood open on the grand piano, set on a dais near the window. The affable and accommodating Tito Ricordi occupied the piano stool and the almighty Giacomo, radiating self-sufficiency and inflated as a pouter pigeon, was enthroned next to him. The function of Tito was to play and sing as much of the "Girl" as anyone desired to hear—and, naturally, everybody wanted to hear as much as possible. Puccini, in such instances, would listen with closed eyes and an air of superterrestrial bliss, occasionally eking out Ricordi's voice with his own and slowly moving his head from side to side in a kind of uncontrollable, half-conscious ecstasy. "Ah, it is wonderful," he would say and say again. We had spoken of American music and I asked his opinion of MacDowell. He had never heard of such a person. "But I—I have written American music," he exclaimed—"It is here," pointing to the score.

Montemezzi also had a score of his new opera at hand. But there was no piano and no one to sing and play. He used "La Nave" chiefly for purposes of photographic pose and in order to refer once or twice to certain phrases of d'Annunzio's poem. I do not intend by this



No. 1—Italo Montemezzi Reading the Piano Score of His Opera "La Nave"; No. 2 (left to right.)—Herbert P. Peyser, Mr. Montemezzi, Carlo Galeffi, Gianni Viafora., Charles Meltzer (Photos by Illustrated News); No. 3—A Profile Study of the Italian Master

to convey the notion that he carries his modesty to depths of abjection. The man has an easy consciousness of the value of his handiwork and confident trust in his powers. He dominates his genius, he does not flaunt it. His reticence is that of mastery, joined to an acute sense of the fitness of things. When I told him of my abiding enthusiasm for "The Love of Three Kings" he stammeringly assured me that I was "very amiable" but admonished me that "La Nave" was a bigger work and entreated me to come to Chicago for the first performance.

He did not mind a roomful of importunate visitors. On the contrary, he strove to be affable. There were on hand Carlo Galeffi, the returned new baritone; Charles Henry Meltzer, who brought English librettos; several Italian newspapermen, the Chicago Company's vigilant press representative and the indispensable Viafora. I was so fortunate as to detach the composer from the buzzing company and practically to monopolize him for the space of an hour. We might have discussed artistic abstractions in greater variety and detail if Montemezzi had been more at ease in French. My conversational Italian derives chiefly from Ghislanzoni, Cammerano, Piave and Illica, with occasional admixtures of Dante. But with good will and the grace of Viafora sufficient could be accomplished. And Montemezzi talked without the prod of coercion, reports of his native timidity notwithstanding. Naive he decidedly is, almost childlike, or countrified. But by no means shrinking. He speaks with a quiet intensity of enthusiasm, all the more forceful because restrained, and is sparing of gesture or vivid play of features. But one feels in the man the aristocracy of soul, the patrician traits of the antique Roman rather than anything common to the ebullient, excitably-wrought Italian of our knowledge.

One of the environs of Verona is Montemezzi's birthplace—Verona, the city of Juliet and of Romeo. His parents are living. The father was in his younger

days a maker of agricultural implements. His earnings were not considerable in the years of Italo's boyhood but they sufficed to the support of the household. The forebears of young Montemezzi do not appear to have shown conspicuous artistic enterprise or predilection. He was the only musician of the family but no one attempted the immemorial practice of thwarting his early aspirations. They gave him a ninety lire piano (less than twenty dollars in the ante-bellum reckoning) and let him enjoy himself. Eventually he found his way into the Milan Conservatory, and got excellent tuition from professors comparatively obscure. His own application and grasp must have been remarkable. He told me with ingenuous glee that he had completed a three years' course of counterpoint and fugue in one. His teacher in harmony was of the old school—not in a derogatory respect. He believed in the sanctity of the three fundamental chords. And as long as his pupils could say their say in these, according to his judgment, he discountenanced any others. They were to be the immovable groundwork on which they built the structure of their compositions. Harmonic sophistries he refused sternly to tolerate.

Instrumentation? Of whom acquired? Under whose guidance had developed that faultless calculation and combinative skill that effected the woven gold, the glistening fabric of the "Three Kings"?

"Of nobody! Under no guidance. Or, rather, under the teachings of my observation alone, and the intuition of my judgment. And in the theater, not the classroom. It is true I had a textbook—a little pocket treatise that I bought for a few cents and that, consequently, gave me very little of what I wanted. But my real lessons in orchestration I got at the Scala, up in the gallery, where I climbed night after night, perching directly over the orchestra, listening and watching. That gallery was my schoolroom; I had no other."

Aside from a symphony written as a student exercise Montemezzi has composed no absolute music. More or less, sooner or later he aspires to do so. Two operas, "Giovanni Gallurese" (on a topic of Sardinian history) and "Helleria", antedate "L'Amore dei Tre Re." Montemezzi is not ready to dismiss these lightly as negligible products of careless youth. He will, on the contrary, present portions of them in concert both in Chicago and New York during the three months of his residence, deeming them sufficiently worthy and representative for such exploitation. His remaining composition prior to "La Nave" took the shape of a cantata, written to order, in commemoration of an anniversary of Ponchielli's death—than whom nobody could be less suggestive than Montemezzi.

"You will like 'La Nave.' It is a larger work than 'L'Amore dei Tre Re', bolder in outline and more massive of dimension. The score is weightier, the bulk and conformation ampler and of greater power. To compose d'Annunzio's poem was long a dear ambition. After several essays I began it finally in 1915—and on St. Mark's day, think you, the festival of the patron saint of Venice, where is the scene of its action. Three years I worked on 'La Nave.' And today, Nov. 3," (the day of our conversation) "is the anniversary of its first production, the anniversary, too, of the capture by Italy of Trieste and of Austria's final discomfiture. D'Annunzio took scarcely less interest than I in the presentation. And he let me know that, by way of fitting celebration, he opened bombardment on Pola that very day. We in Milan had a success. Toscanini was delighted with the work. I can see him even now as he read it for the first time, sweeping the pages of the orchestral score with his eyes—his near-sightedness—made him fairly glue his face to the pages, which he brusquely raised and lowered, as if to embrace the full scope of the instrumentation at a glance—and emitting dark growls that, with him, indicate satisfaction.

"For myself I was pleased with the reception of the work. But the greatest emotional experience of my life was after all the premiere of 'L'Amore dei Tre Re.'"

It is a perversely curious thing that one always links the names of Montemezzi and Puccini. Not because they are alike, but for that they are so extremely unlike. The one is very nearly everything that the other is not. When "L'Amore" was first produced here it gained a tremendous share of critical commendation for its avoidance of rubber-stamp Puccinisms. Almost unconsciously I found myself vaunting the composer of "L'Amore" to his face for girding his spirit against the artistic obliquities of the modern Meyerbeer. He smiled slyly and there was much meaning in the smile, but sidestepped whatever may have been my implied question.

There was talk of the public, of operatic style and subject matter, of musical form and inspiration. One of my fellow-visitors drew near at this juncture to ask Montemezzi if he were not an idealist. The half-whimsical, half-puzzled expression which overspread his face was an incomparable commentary on this egregious inquiry. Finally he owned to the idealism and admitted himself a dreamer of dreams.

"Are they not, truly, all one? a refuge, a solace? Yes, I am an idealist and my aim is beauty—beauty with the shallow concessions that men, wholly serving the essence and intent of

(Continued on page 4)