

Covent Garden Opera "at Sixes and Sevens," Asserts Maxwell

Managing Director of House of Ricordi Finds a Confused Situation in London—Delights of Messenger's "Monsieur Beaucaire"—Foudrain Writing Set of Six Songs for America—Opera and Chamber Music in Italy—The American Public's Musical Knowledge and Its Attitude to New Works

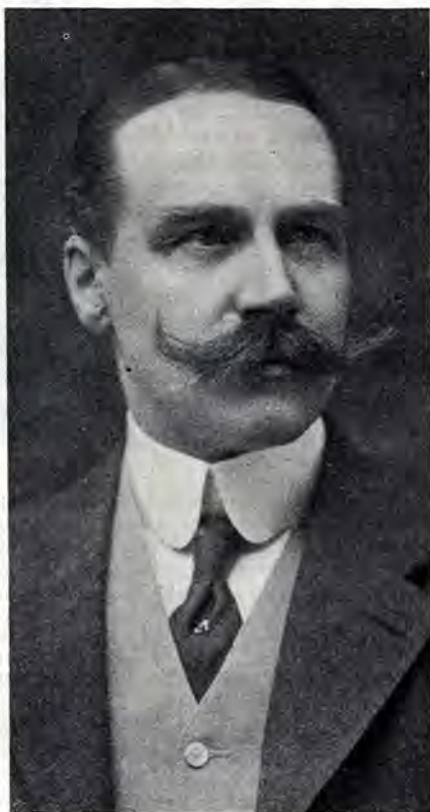
BACK in New York, after being in Europe since the first week in April, I found George Maxwell, managing director of G. Ricordi & Co., at his desk one day last week, busy with the hundred details that absorb him from one end of the year to the other. It was not a pleasure trip that took him to England; on the contrary, from the time he set foot on land until his return during the first week of July, it was all work and hard work, too; there was a brief respite, and that was two days which Mr. Maxwell spent with visiting his father at Isle of Bute, in Scotland. Barring that, it was bracing action from April to July. Much was accomplished and plans laid for more to be achieved in the future.

If there are those who are unfamiliar with what it means to be the head of the house of Ricordi in America, let me inform them that it is a post of great responsibility. There are the opera companies to be cared for, the distribution of novelties to the leading operatic organizations, the publishing of new American works (for the Ricordi firm in New York has an American catalog of decided merit, quite apart from its Italian publications) the collecting of fees from singers who wish to sing excerpts from Ricordi copyright operas, and other things, too, which are of a less public nature. All these George Maxwell does with distinction, for he has lived in the world of music all his life; he is a musician, as well as head of a publishing house, and he works with an art ideal.

We talked first of opera, for that is a Ricordi specialty. I was not surprised at what I heard first. "Covent Garden is suffering from a case of 'too many cooks,'" said Mr. Maxwell, "and the opera there this season was the worst ever." Jolly news, this, to learn that the venerable British home of opera is losing its erstwhile greatness. Mr. Maxwell went first to London, while there to be present at the production of the Puccini tryptich, "Tabarro," "Suor Angelica" and "Gianni Schicchi." "The tryptich was not mounted," he told me, "for no one in the direction at Covent Garden seemed to understand that they needed very careful preparation and that they could not be simply rushed on." Apparently Sir Thomas Beecham is not doing so much good as was expected in his advent in the London operatic fortress! Those behind the managerial scenes hint that the Beecham Syndicate is working now to obtain exclusive management of Covent Garden by the time the next operatic season comes round. As Mr. Maxwell explained, it will not do much for modern Italian opera, for Sir Thomas is a strong advocate of opera in English.

"Emmy Destinn (or Destinova, pardon) was in fine voice; Thomas Burke, the new tenor, is unusually fine, and Albert Coates, the English conductor, also stands out as one of the saving features of the London opera season," continued Mr. Maxwell. "With the exception of Martinelli, who seemed to be the right

man in the right place at the right moment, the rest of the company filled out a rather indifferent company—for Covent Garden. The only other musical thing in London outside of the opera that was worth going to was Messenger's 'Monsieur



—Photo Mishkin

George Maxwell, Managing Director for America of G. Ricordi & Co.

Beaucaire,' which has made a remarkable and well-merited success. If the kind of music that M. Messenger has written in this opera has come to stay, I am very glad. It is so delicious, so refined in style and so beautiful that I cannot say enough about it. Maggie Teyte was superb in it, as was also Marion Green, who both sang and acted admirably. You know it was put on by Gilbert Miller, Henry Miller's son, and he deserves all praise for the way he has mounted it. While in London I contracted with Mr. Miller for the London production of Louis Ganne's delightful 'Hans, the Flute-Player,' which was so well received at the Manhattan in New York in Oscar Hammerstein's days. Mr. Miller will produce it in October, I believe. There are innumerable concerts in London, you know the kind I mean, debutantes' recitals and that sort of thing. Nothing extraordinary, except Benno Moiseiwitsch, the Polish pianist, who, I see, is coming here next season. He is a fine artist, and I think he will have a big success in America."

The orchestral situation in London Mr. Maxwell found to be about the same as before the war. The operatic situation, as I have narrated, he calls "clouded." From London he went on to Paris, where there are indications of a big season to come. In the French capital Mr. Maxwell found things booming in music and in general industry. And conditions there far better than in London. "There is nothing that you cannot get in Paris to-day," he said; "the prices are, of course, high, but they have everything and are not in want at all. In London things are difficult to obtain and the prices sky-high. As for Italy, the food conditions and other commodities that are necessities are terrible in the real sense of the word. I will speak of that later."

"While in Paris I visited the house of Enoch, whom I represent in America. They have published the opera, 'The Blue Bird,' by Albert Wolff, the French conductor, which I learn has been announced as a novelty for next season at the Metropolitan. No arrangements had been made for the performing rights for the Metropolitan up to the time I left Paris. So the news struck me as a bit strange when I heard it on my return. I have the score

here in my office," and Mr. Maxwell went to the piano, where a copy of it was lying with other music that he brought back with him.

Fourdrain Songs for America

"I met Félix Fourdrain in Paris, a charming man, who is delighted with the conspicuous success which his songs have won in America. He has just been demobilized, having served the whole time of the war in France's army. I told him which of his songs had been most widely sung here, and he seemed to recognize at once the type of thing that American audiences like. And I am happy to announce that he promised to write a set of six songs for me, which I shall publish—songs which he said would be designed for America, both in subject matter and musical treatment. They would be forthcoming, he assured me, as soon as he finds the suitable poems. I was delighted, too, to know that the several series of transcriptions for violin and for 'cello of classical manuscripts by J. Salmon of Paris, in which I have been deeply interested for some time, are having a great vogue in France. They are played everywhere. You will recall that Thibaud played some of them here in his recitals. I shall see to it this Winter that they are given a wider hearing in America, for they are in every way exceptionally fine pieces, arranged with a mastery and a feeling for their innate classic nature, such as I have noted in no other arranger's work."

"Traveling? Very bad, I should say, for Europe is not yet a place to go about in. The difficulties of traveling are many and there are all too many persons riding around who have no business to. I thought before I got over there that it was difficult to get passports from the United States to Europe, but I was quickly disillusioned when I saw so many Americans there."

In Paris, Mr. Maxwell, as president of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, attempted once more to make treaty arrangements between the American and French societies. For reasons best known to the Board of the French Society, they have handed their business over to an agent whose terms and conditions make it impossible for Mr. Maxwell to accept in all fairness to the other societies who already have treaties with the American Society. Unfortunately, this means the elimination of French composers' works from many programs, especially the playing by the smaller orchestras of the more popular works. It is evident that the establishments where such music is performed cannot pay two societies. Several French composers have promised to take this matter up before the French Society."

Italy was the next country to engage Mr. Maxwell's attention. Milan and Florence were both visited. In the Italian operatic stronghold, where the house of Ricordi has its headquarters, Mr. Maxwell spent some time, arranging matters of a business nature, which were pressing, owing to the fact that Tito Ricordi, former president of the Casa Ricordi, is no longer in the firm. Mr. Maxwell informed me that there had been entirely satisfactory rearrangements made, and that the future of the house was brighter than ever. His own position remains the same, with the exception of the fact that he will have even more responsibility than in the past. In March, 1920, he goes on a trip to South America, where he will open a Ricordi branch in Buenos Aires. And next summer he will make another trip, to explore new territory, in all probability in the East. "Italy is in bad straits," Mr. Maxwell went on to say, "for food there is still scarce. But in spite of it there is great activity and things will change, I am sure. I saw Toscanini, the great maestro, dined at his home, and found him more brilliant than ever. And Montemezzi I visited also. The charming Lucrezia Bori I saw in Milan. As you have unquestionably heard, her voice is restored to her and she is singing beautifully, according to all reports. She told me that she would come to the Metropolitan, if she could get released from Monte Carlo, for the latter part of the season, as the Metropolitan doesn't want her for the whole season."

Indeed! "One of the joys of my Milan stay was attending the series of Trio concerts at the Conservatorio given the last part of April by Ernesto Consolo, pianist; Arrigo Serato, violinist, and Enrico

Mainardi, 'cellist. These three distinguished Italians joined forces in three concerts, at which they performed Beethoven's Trio, Op. 97, Schumann's D Minor Trio, Martucci's Trio, Op. 62, Schubert's B-Flat Trio, Orefice's Trio in C Minor and Brahms's Trio, Op. 87. In addition Messrs. Consolo and Serato gave the Franck and Schumann D Minor sonatas and Messrs. Consolo and Mainardi the Grieg A Minor Sonata. I have never heard such trio playing before; it was the last word in ensemble. Toscanini was there and was transported with the playing of these musicians. You know Consolo and Serato from their American tours. Mainardi is in the same class with them, to my mind the greatest 'cellist I have heard."

"Operatically there will be considerable of interest. The Dal Verme will begin a fine season in October. La Scala, on the other hand, has hardly recovered itself. Zandonai's new opera, a comedy in the grand manner, called 'La Via della Finestra,' will be given its première at Pesaro this month. I have the score and it is an entrancing work. Then there is a ballet by Riccardo Pick-Mangiagalli called 'Carillon Magico,' that ought to be heard in America. It is a fascinating thing and has scored a notable triumph for its composer in Rome, where it has been given. It has become a distinct popular success."

"Contrasted with the Covent Garden situation of things at sixes and sevens I found that it was possible to put on new operas splendidly in Florence. We gave the Puccini tryptich at the Pergola there on May 19, and produced it fourteen times in five weeks. Its success was very great. Puccini was present and was delighted. It showed that, even in a smaller city, a fine production can be made, if there is a proper appreciation of the work in hand. You will be interested to know that Edoardo di Giovanni, or Edward Johnson, as he was known in America before he went to Europe, was the Luigi in 'Tabarro' and the Rinnuccio in 'Schicchi,' and that he scored in both parts. He is an artist of real worth and ought to be a valuable addition to Mr. Campanini's company when he comes this winter."

Then we talked of the attitude of the public. And Mr. Maxwell justly found fault with the American public for its attitude toward new operas. I have agreed with him on this subject for years. "The public in this country takes art as an amusement," he says, "and it goes to a new opera just as it goes to a new Broadway musical comedy or farce. This public displays neither preparation nor concentration for a new work of art; it hears the work and with snap judgment says it likes or does not like it. It reads the review of the performance by its favorite critic, and then talks about it as though it really understood. I tell you that the standard of knowledge is not high enough here. That is what hinders the sale of good music, songs, piano pieces, etc. The public is a quantity buying public, not a quality buying one. It does not look inside the cover of a song—it looks at the cover to see who wrote it. You will tell me that it is improving. Probably true, but it has a long way to go before it will have the knowledge to back up the pronouncements which it makes about works of art. I have seen new operas discussed by persons who wouldn't know a C major chord if it were exhibited to them on paper, or played to them on an instrument."

"Music is an art, not an amusement, and the sooner these persons who delegate unto themselves the right to pass on it find that out the better for them. They are the people who keep the operatic impresarios from giving them many novelties, yet they cry for novelties and when they get them they say that they lack this and lack that. And they forget all the time that the lack is not in the opera, but in the person listening to it."

Here is a theme for serious study on the part of the public. I did not expect Mr. Maxwell to enunciate it at this season of the year, but I am glad that he did. It opens up a subject that needs discussion. The lack is not in the new operas—though some of them are pretty dull from the standpoint of musical invention, I admit—it is in the public, which has a knowledge of music smaller than that which it has of any other art, except painting. But at any rate, in connection with painting people have the decency to admit that they know nothing about it.

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