

NOTHING NEW ABOUT PAID-FOR APPLAUSE

Like the Poor, the Claque Has Always Been with Us—Originated by Nero, Developed by France, Adopted by Italy and Transported to America—Scientifically Conducted in Paris to Provide Appropriate Reactions for All Sorts of Operatic Situations—Experiences of American Débutantes

By OSCAR THOMPSON
Sketches by Viafora

CHICAGO'S discovery that its opera has a claque scarcely startled America. Revelations growing out of the Baklanoff imbroglio, though sufficiently malodorous, did not make a very malignant monster of this traditional and much denounced operatic appendage, which Italy acquired from France and then passed on to America. Of more concern as involving the good name of opera were admissions said to have been made regarding the "shaking down" of artists by lesser employees of the opera house in ways not connected with paid applause. In Chicago, as in New York, the claque seems to have been a more or less harmless nuisance from which the individual's graft was relatively small, and the results nil, as far as making or breaking the career of an artist, good or bad. Its toleration, in any degree or state, is the thing that offends American audiences.

Like the poor, the claque has always been with us. Suetonius affirms that Nero had five thousand soldiers present to see him act and to chant an encomium. Whether there was a claque to applaud Nero's fiddling as Rome burned Suetonius does not state. The Greek classic dramatists doubtless saw to it that their friends were present when their plays were performed. What the friends did, in return, can be left to any logical man's conjecture. It is not probable that they hissed.

There is no more common error with regard to the claque than assailing it as an Italian institution. The very word is French and had to be introduced into the Italian language. The institution, as an institution, was unknown in Italy even so late as the early Rossini operas. Doubtless there was paid applause, as there had been in Greece and Imperial Rome; but it is to Paris that the prying eye must turn to find the establishment of the institutional claque as the world has known it for the last hundred years.

The operatic claque, it is fair to say, belongs by right of birth and nurture to the Paris Opéra as truly as the ballet and the grand manner. It can no more be divorced from the history of that famous pulpit of song than the operas of Meyerbeer. It was in the Meyerbeerian era that the claque came to be, and it was as logically a part of its age as orchestral shivers and trumpet calls, bobbing ballerinas with their thirty-two *fouettes*, and opera books that dealt with kings and things and burning oil.

Historic Claque of Paris Opéra

Numerous authorities give the birth of the institutional claque as the year 1820. They credit one Sauton (also spelled Santon) with being the master mind, aided and abetted by one Porcher. They hung out their shingle, for they were in a regular business, the business of assuring dramatic success—"L'Assurance des Succès Dramatique." By 1830 the claque was a full-bloom institution, collecting by day and applauding by night, all in the honest open. It was the custom for the management of the theater to send a request for any given number of *claqueurs*, under a suitable *chef de claque*.



"Chef de Claque"

Victor Hugo in "Les Misérables" took note of the institution when he wrote, "The claque at the Grand Opera is very select," and again, "We will go to the Opera. We will go in with the claque." In the Paris claque, as it flourished in

the days of Meyerbeer and the grand manner, each *claqueur* had his special rôle allotted him, according to his talents, and the assignment list reads like a comic opera cast. There was the *rieur*, officially so styled. His business was to laugh at the comic sallies, and he was picked as a *rieur* because he had an infectious laugh. There was the *pleureur*, who wept through the pathetic passages. The *pleureur* or *pleureuse*, usually was a feminine *claqueur*, copiously armed with handkerchiefs, sometimes laden with tear-compelling lotions which offended the olfactory organs of nasute persons in adjacent seats. There was the *bisseur*, whose task it was to shout "bis" and "encore," and an individual variously styled but most often referred to as "the tickler," who was an expert in keeping his neighbors in good humor, passing about bonbons, theater bills and spicy stories. Of appropriate dignity and importance were the *commissaires*, who learned the opera or play by heart and who, by conversation or otherwise, learnedly called its good points to the attention of less enlightened folk. All were under the direction of a *chef de claque*, who frequently was an excellent musician and who considered himself somewhat superior to the critics.



"Rieur"

All this grew out of Sauton's *Assurance des Succès Dramatiques*. Sauton is said to have derived his idea from Jean Daurat, a sixteenth century French poet, who, reading of Nero's methods of gaining the public's plaudits, distributed tickets for one of his own plays in return for promises of applause. It seems probable that even Sauton had no idea of such an elaborate institution as resulted from his scheme.



"The Tickler"

Chefs de claque attended final rehearsals in order to study the opera and work out a system of applause. There was something of conscientious art in their study. Often their assistants were merely picked up, and the *chef de claque* then had to instruct, even drill, his helpers. The *claqueurs* of Paris were called "*chevaliers du lustre*," because the main body of them sat near the middle of the *parterre*, beneath the grand chandelier. Others were distributed throughout the house. Apparently the Paris claque not only was more aristocratic, but much more comfortably looked after than the crowd that stands around the rail at the Metropolitan!

When Rachel Took the Claque to Task

An old letter that has been preserved is a delicious commentary on the times and perhaps a bit pathetic in showing how seriously the *chef de claque* regarded his mission. Mme. Rachel, it seems, once complained to a claque master that whereas she had been uproariously greeted at the first performance of a particular work there was very much less enthusiasm at its repetition a few days later. The scolded applause leader replied with a letter containing the following:

"I cannot remain under the obloquy of a reproach from such lips as yours! At the first representation I led the attack in person thirty-three times. We had three acclamations, four hilarities,

two thrilling movements, four renewals of applause, and two indefinite explosions."

He then went on to say that his men were positively exhausted with fatigue and had told him they could not do so much again, "so," he wrote, "I applied for the manuscript and, having profoundly studied the piece, I was obliged to make up my mind for the second representation to certain curtailments, in the interests of my men."



"Pleureuse"

Meyerbeer's "Robert the Devil," Halévy's "La Juive," Rossini's "William Tell," and Auber's "Dumb Girl of Portici" were the great works of the day when the claque was youthful and aristocratic. Modern opera-goers may ponder whether they would need to be told when to applaud in works of this *genre*.

But it is not to be supposed that the claque always had its own way with things. There have been riots in both France and Italy, if old writers recorded the facts, due to ill-timed efforts on the part of the claque to overcome popular disapproval.

From Paris the idea of an organized claque was carried into Italy. There it has fastened itself upon all the opera houses, big and small, but it never seems to have acquired the respectability of the Paris claque. Its operations have been more or less under cover and often have smacked of extortion and blackmail rather than "assuring the success" of a new work, though not to the degree of brigandage that singers say has obtained in Spain, particularly Madrid.

Italian Claque Was Patriotic

One phase of the development of the Italian claque is of historical importance. During the days of the Austrian occupation, the time of Verdi's young manhood, the claque took on a nationalistic, patriotic character and had as its mission the baiting of the local Austrian officials. As is well known, several of Verdi's

operas had to be rewritten because the Austrians objected to scenes representing conspiracy, revolution, or irreverence toward royalty. Notable among these were "Ernani," "Un Ballo in Maschera" and "Rigoletto." But in their modified



The Patriot

form a line could be found here and there that could be construed as representing Italian patriotism. It was the business of the claque leaders to know these lines and to start a demonstration whenever they were sung. In "I Lombardi" the Milanese were quick to detect a passage which, when singled out, had an anti-Austrian inference. The vogue of "Attila" at La Scala is recorded as partly due to the opportunity it afforded for patriotic demonstrations.

Grove wrote that the London opera patron could have no idea of the frenzy of an Italian audience so stirred. "The overcrowded house," he said, "was in a perfect roar; clapping of hands, shouts, cries, screams, stamps, thumps with sticks and umbrellas, were heard from every corner, while hats, bonnets, flowers, fans, books of words and newspapers flew from the galleries and boxes to the stalls and from the stalls back to the boxes and the stage—the noise often entirely covering up the sound of both orchestra and chorus and lasting till the police could restore order or there was no breath left in the audience."

A single sentence, such as "*Cara Patria mia madre e Regina*" or "*Avrai tu l'Universo, resti l'Italia per me*" from "Ernani," was sufficient to produce this uproar. It was the business of the leaders of the patriotic claque to act in a capacity not so very different from the college yell leader of to-day.

"Viva Verdi" became a sort of rallying cry in the Italian opera houses. The claque led it. The letters of Verdi's name—V-E-R-D-I—represented, to the Nationalists, "Victor Emanuel Re d'Italia," King Victor Emanuel of Piedmont being then the hope of the Italians who dreamed of shaking off the Austrian yoke.

Of late Americans have heard more of the Italian claque than the French. Tito Schipa first became well known on this side of the Atlantic as the tenor who had defied the claque. American singers who began their careers in Italy have had many tales to tell, some of them highly humorous, of blackmailing demands made upon them—pay and be given an ovation, refuse to pay and be hissed and hooted off the stage!

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