

How Modern Criticism Is Justly Smiting the Musically Unfit

More Exacting Standard of To-day Promises to Do Away with Superficiality in Music—Tremendous Desire for "Immediate Achievement" the Greatest Drawback to the Country's Art—Plethora of Beautiful Voices but a Rarity of Real Artistry in this Country—Mediocrity No Longer Tolerated—The True Measure of an Artist's Greatness

By REINALD WERRENRATH



Reinald Werrenrath, American Baritone, Who Is Defending the Newer Standards of Criticism in This Country

There has been a great and very interesting change in the attitude of audiences and critics since the beginning of this season, that is, within the last five or six weeks, since the recitals have opened in Aeolian and Carnegie Halls. It is a change which is resented alike by the young amateur and the manager who each year puts over or tries to put over, a herd of débutants.

I have heard this attitude called by such terms as intolerance, harsh bias, and a supercilious desire to be hypercritical in order to be "highbrow." It is none of these things—it is merely a very promising attitude, an attitude I have been hoping for for many years. The public and the critics are demanding a higher standard of art. The day has gone by when only a beautiful voice, or merely good diction, or personal magnetism, or a good program, or interpretive art, or an aptitude for language, will get over. An artist must have all, not only one of these things. There is and always will be, especially in this country of wonderful natural voices, a plethora of artists with beautiful vocal tone. Beautiful voices are a drug on the market, but real art with a great perspective is a rarity indeed.

The Superficial Spirit

I believe it was Harold Bauer who hit the nail on the head in a recent interview when asked what he considered the greatest drawback to the development of art in this country. He said it was the "desire for immediate achievement."

That has always been the outstanding American fault, more especially in music. Although I have been contradicted many times, I still contend that maturity is not a state of mind but a matter of years, of time—a matter of assimilation. There are rare exceptions to this I grant, for instance, Helfetz, who, though now only nineteen, has the maturity of mind of a man of many years—but here we have the very rare thing called "genius."

It seems that the young vocal artist feels that when he has acquired a repertoire of some hundred or two hundred songs, he is ready for public recitals merely because he has learned the actual mechanical stunt of mentally recording the notes, phrases, and words of two hundred songs. But he doesn't seem to comprehend that he must live with these songs for years before he can understand what they mean, to say nothing of acquiring the knowledge of projecting this meaning to his hearers.

Does he study the text, does he analyze

it, does he know the spirit of the man who wrote it, or when or why it was written? Does he know why the composer chose it, does he seek to find the beauty of the welding of the music and the text? No, because he is busy adding to his repertoire instead of digesting it. He learns from a book or manuscript not

from the things which are between the printed lines.

Years ago, we, the young students of my earlier years, used to go to concerts with our text book and retentive, photographic, receptive memories, and we took a lesson from the older and more experienced artist. We listened with

reverence to their mature art and interpretation—the result of years of study. To-day, we find little if any of the attitude which shows the desire for the real depth of true art.

This superficial attitude, which has been so noticeable in the past five years or more is suddenly called to a halt. First by the critics and then by what is infinitely more valuable to the artist because they mean his livelihood—Mr. and Mrs. Audience. People do not want to hear pretty music or beautiful voices, they want "Art" with capital letters. People do not care how hard an artist has to work or practice, how many vocal lessons he takes a week, of the difficulties he may have with diction or foreign languages. They come to hear the finished product for which they pay two dollars, and they have a right to demand it.

Anecdotes are always illustrative. Several years ago I heard a young tenor who had a remarkably beautiful voice and a natural aptitude for learning. He had been singing some very good small engagements. One day, I met him when he had had his first request for an entire recital in one of our largest and most musical cities. He sent in a program which was promptly returned with a request for a group of German *lieder*. He hurried to his vocal teacher for help. He was in a quandry, for he had only learned one or two *lieder* and wondered what he should or could do, as he did not want to lose his very first important engagement. His teacher, who had only been working with him a short time, suggested that he get to work to learn what he could in the short time before the recital.

"What shall I learn first?" asked the tenor.

"Well," replied his teacher, handing him several volumes which included a book of Schumann. "You might begin by learning all the *Dichteliebe* and then—"

"All of them," asked the tenor in surprise. "Why all of them if I may only be asked to sing one or two?"

This, I think, illustrates a complete lack of the understanding of acquiring real art, or, what is infinitely worse, a knowingly superficial attitude toward it as a profession or a study. It is needless to say that this tenor of the beautiful voice, though still singing, has never been taken seriously and has meant nothing toward the advancement or development of American music, and is not engaged to sing with big or important organizations.

Mediocrity Finds No Place

It is good to see that American artistic standards have reached such a high level that mediocrity is no longer tolerated. It is this much resented intolerance that will show the young artist that "the desire for immediate achievement," accomplished only through superficial study, must give way, if real art is to be desired and developed. And now it appears that whether the artist wants to understand and advance or not, the public demands it. Sensational singing or physical display to cover up the lack of real singing is being resented in no uncertain terms, audibly and in print. It has finally come into the consciousness of critic and audience alike, that all a singer is required to do is to sing—in a direct, simple manner, and to regard his art unaffectedly, without pretentiousness, but with seriousness and veneration.

Apparently musical debauch, personal affectation, and flippancy as to dress or other extraneous exaggerations, are to be taboo. The realization has come that an artist is not great who must resort to the reading into a text or melody, embroidery that was never designed by either lyricist or composer. Physical contortions, shrugging of shoulders, and the like, will not be accepted in lieu of vocal and musical interpretation. A man must present his work not because of his physical person, but rather in spite of it, and the real artist should be glad to prove that his success is achieved merely through his musicianship plus the force he exercises over people through the power of his own personality and magnetism. After all, the true measure of an artist's greatness is not what he accomplishes selfishly to please the inner man, but that which he gives out honestly toward satisfying and uplifting his fellow men.



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