

WILD AUDIENCES I HAVE KNOWN

By MAURICE HALPERSON

Veteran New York Critic Describes Turbulent Incidents in Opera Houses of Italy—Differences in Behavior of Anglo-Saxon and Latin Music Lovers—How Parma Put a Tenor to Flight—An Impresario Becomes an Advocate of War and Leads an Attack on a Violent Audience—Signal Victory for Chorus, Armed with Wooden Swords, Follows Siege of Coffee House—The Effective Curse of a Robust "Moses" and the Rock That Fell on "One Night Only"

BEFORE I venture to write about a few of the most interesting and amusing opera house incidents in Italy and other Latin countries, some of them witnessed by me, some of them recounted by eye-witnesses, I wish to preface my subject with a few general comments upon the great differences in the behavior of the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin audiences.

Nothing is easier than to think one's own standpoint the only right one. Nothing is less fair than that. We are creatures of our education and surroundings. So are the Latin peoples, and it would be decidedly unjust to condemn them only because they look at many things with eyes quite different from ours.

What wild and brutal scenes I have witnessed in Italian and Spanish opera houses! They formed the greatest contrast to the always refined and tactful behavior of Anglo-Saxon audiences. But, on the other hand, what an unbounded enthusiasm if an opera or the artists please the listener. It is then as though an irresistible wave of deep feeling, of illimitable admiration of the good in art would sweep over the audience. We are less demonstrative and enthusiastic in praise and in giving ovations, but on the other hand, we do not like to give public expression to our disapproval in artistic matters.

Our audiences, no doubt, go too far in their tolerance of mediocrity. Even poor artists are spared the bitterness of a public rebuke. With all my aversion to brutal scenes in the theater, I must confess that the right to express disapproval, in my opinion, belongs to an audience as much as the right of approbation. The problem lies in the great difficulty of finding a dignified way of expressing disapproval.

The reserved behavior of Anglo-Saxon listeners cannot be considered a blessing unalloyed, as it is only too apt to create conditions which are rather a hindrance to the true interests of art than otherwise. This restraint often places the vast majority under the control of a reckless minority. Our audiences in their undisturbed equanimity appear sometimes almost helpless in face of the many tricks played by the conceit and assurance on the part of many artists and of certain shrewd managers. Thereby a situation is developed which finds the public unable to take care of its proper legitimate interests, which in turn compels the critics to be decidedly sharp in their reports. In such cases the critics appear as the attorneys of the public who have to represent the legitimate rights of their clients.

Reserve Encores for the End

There ought to be a difference between an official concert before a paying public and the behavior at a private musicale, where the artistic atrocities of the daughter of the house are inflicted upon the helpless guests in return for lobster salad, ice cream and grape juice punch.

But even if no protest is voiced by the more intelligent and energetic part of the public, the failure of a mediocre or

poor artist seldom is apparent, especially to the artist himself. There is always an innocent soul who starts to applaud, and as it would be very impolite to let one man carry through the applause, a few others follow and then a few more, and the artist, incapable as he showed himself to be, can boast of a *succès d'estime*. This excessive generosity on the part of our audiences is responsible for many abuses, among which the "encore evil" is in my opinion the most intolerable. I, for one, am trying hard to eradicate this nuisance. I never take any notice in my reports of an encore unless it be a real artistic revelation, and if my colleagues would follow me in that, we would be less annoyed by the innumerable encores, those expressions of artistic vanity. Give as many encores as you wish, ladies and gentlemen of the concert stage, but reserve them for the end of the program!

And do not forget one thing. A Latin is much livelier and more expansive than an Anglo-Saxon. First of all, music, and especially opera, is for the former an almost sacred thing. An enjoyment and a divine service at the same time. A necessary part of existence! The Latins feel like judges when going to the opera houses, with the principle of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!" while Anglo-Saxons can be considered in this respect as the mild and considerate judges of a children's court. The Latins enter the opera house with the idea that the standard of art must be heightened, even if artistic blood should flow in the battle. But there is another less idealistic and more practical standpoint to be considered. The Latin opera-goer is a good business man even in artistic matters. He does not want to be tricked. He pays for his artistic enjoyment and he insists upon the "delivery of the promised goods."

Suppose your butcher or your grocer would send you poor wares for good money, or they would serve you in the restaurant a stale piece of steak at exorbitant price. Well, the Latin opera-goer reasons as follows: "They are indebted to me for the price of my opera ticket for a good performance with effective artists and a decent ensemble. I would not accept any substitution and would protest immediately and in the most unmistakable manner if they wanted to make me a prey of their shrewd tricks. And suppose a great

star, who sings at fabulous prices, feels indisposed at some performance, I certainly shall hiss him. If he is not in good condition, let him admit his incapability and decline to sing. I certainly cannot be expected to pay star prices for an indisposed artist."

But now let us jump *in medias res*.

The Terrible Public of Parma

There is hardly an opera house in all of sunny Italy whose public is so terribly feared as that of the opera house of old little Parma. I would say that after Parma the operatic temple of Naples, the famous San Carlo, and then the opera houses of Madrid, Barcelona and Lisbon prove the severest test for the effectiveness of a singer.

There has been here among us for many years a quaint little gentleman who can boast of his Parmesan origin, Count Gaspare Baldassare Melchiorre Camuti, known as a great-commercial light of the Italian colony and still more admired as an incomparable wit. Opera is sacred to him, and when he talks about his native Parma and its glorious opera house, there is no end of little tales and anecdotes of the most amusing kind. Count Camuti was considered one of the most inexorable judges of operas and artists in Parma. Among his interesting recollections the following description of an operatic "Wild West" is one of the most prominent.

It was in the great operatic season of 1885, and a special performance of "Aïda," in which a new tenor, himself from Parma, had to make his debut as *Radames*, had filled the old operatic temple to the utmost of its capacity. The audience seemed in great expectation, but an undercurrent of unfriendliness and dissatisfaction was unmistakable. Why? No one knew the exact reason, but sometimes audiences, like individuals, are in bad humor.

The looks of *Radames* aroused disfavor from the very beginning. Hardly had he begun his recitative "Se quel guerrier io fossi," when a storm of cries of "Cosa?" and "Come?" (What's that? How's that?) were heard, followed by the most violent hisses. The outbreak was so wild and was so unexpected, that the conductor and orchestra stopped. The poor artist seemed almost paralyzed, unable to utter a single tone. His open mouth and the terrified expression of his eyes seemed to make the public only more violent and cruel. Rotten oranges and lemons—these unappetizing projectiles of theatrical warfare never fail when the masses need them—rained from all sides of the gallery onto the stage, followed by shoes quickly snatched from feet, while a part of the gallery public started in to break the seats in order to bombard the stage with more massive missiles.

From the proscenium boxes and the first orchestra rows the people jumped on the stage, in order to punish the unhappy singer for the crime of his first notes which sounded somewhat pinched under the influence of his terrible stage fright. But the tenor did not wait for his persecutors. Picking up his long Egyptian costume, he fled from the stage in a panic, reached the back door and ran out into the street. Can you imagine the sight of the unhappy Egyptian general, persecuted by a crowd which grew larger every moment? Not only a part of the visitors to the opera house, but even the chorus men all dressed up as priests or warriors, had joined the wild chase. It was fortunate for the

poor knight of the still poorer high C that he reached his hotel just a minute before his pursuers. There he just managed to lock himself in the first room he found open, and to hide under the bed. It took the police an hour to quell the riot. The unfortunate singer left Parma the same night under the protection of almost Egyptian darkness and was never seen again in the city that can boast of giving the name to one of the most delicate and piquant cheeses in the world.

An Impresario Leads to Battle

I am indebted to our friend Mr. Gatti-Casazza for an operatic incident which took place in his native Ferrara about a quarter of a century ago. The operatic season was then anything but a success and the poor impresario had to face a situation that foretold ruin. Two of his productions had failed completely and in order to gain time to prepare another novelty, he ventured to give a performance of old time-honored "Norma."

But the subscribers were in a rage, and the first performance of Bellini's opera brought a disastrous failure. It was clear after the second act that the performance would scarcely reach its customary end. In the lobby and in the corridors the loudly protesting subscribers made an infernal noise. The singers were discouraged and advised the director not to attempt the third act.

The impresario then addressed the chorus in a violent way. "Do you hear them, those *briganti*, how they shout, how they storm? They wish to ruin me and all of you. They know that you will lose your bread if the theater has to be closed and that there is no possibility of another engagement in the middle of the season for you. Let us have revenge at least. Follow me and let us teach them a lesson how to treat art and artists."

Then the battle began. The chorus men, followed by the ladies, the time-honored Valkyries and Amazons, burst into the auditorium, then into the corridors and began to attack the perplexed subscribers with their wooden swords and other improvised weapons. It is difficult to describe the following pandemonium. Mr. Gatti-Casazza tells us that after some resistance which proved ineffective, the surprised theater-goers fled in a panic, pursued by the enraged old Romans. The fleeing crowd entered in haste the coffee house opposite the theater, where the frightened waiters closed the doors. A regular siege ensued, ending with the complete victory of the impresario and his improvised army.

Can you imagine our orderly ladies and gentlemen of the chorus, pursuing, under Mr. Setti's guidance, the distinguished subscribers of the Metropolitan Opera across the street and assaulting them in Brown's Chop House?

It was fortunate for the besieged in Ferrara that the majority of them could leave the coffee house unseen, by way of a corridor leading to a neighboring house, otherwise the number of victims would have been larger. There were more than forty wounded anyway, some of whom had to be bandaged. The number of broken hats and torn clothes was legion.

The Curse That Moved a Rock

When I was a little boy, my music loving mother took me to the celebrated Fenice Opera House in Venice, in order

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Paterno, Once Famous Tenor, in a "Close-Up" by an Italian Caricaturist. No words Need Be Added to the Artist's Graphic Description of His Trouble. He Emerges Triumphant to Make His Admirers Respond with Unrestrained "Bravos" to a Final High C in His Best Style