

Enrico Caruso: An Estimate of the Sovereign Singer

Tenor Came to America a Great Voice, Departed a Superb Artist—Three Distinct Periods to Be Considered in Appraising His Powers, Attributes, Virtues and Faults—Began as Lyric and Enlarged His Tone in So-Called "Raw Beef" Phase—Penalty of Prodigality Exacted in the Peroration of His Long Career, When His High Tones Showed Wear—Development of Exquisite Mezza-Voce a Delight of Final Years—New Powers of Characterization Opened Fresh Vistas in Interpretation—Might Have Been the Greatest Baritone as Well as Greatest Tenor

By Oscar Thompson

IF it is true that no fair evaluation ordinarily can be made of the great of earth until the flight of years has brought to the appraisal the perspective of distance, a salient exception would seem to present itself when attempt is made to estimate the voice and art and career of a giant among singers, such as was taken from a sorrowing world when Enrico Caruso ceased to breathe ten days ago.

A few generations, and a singer is only a name. Those who heard him in the flesh must formulate the opinion of posterity. Not his vision, nor the influence of deeds surviving beyond him, determines his place among the immortals. The reactions of his audiences, of the reviewers, the musical clerisy, the rank and file of those who only know whether they are moved to admiration or left unstirred, decide, in the end, whether his name lives on. If he is neglected or misunderstood or unappreciated for what he is in his years of song, the future is not likely to discover him. He leaves behind him no advocate to plead his cause, such as the manuscript of a greatly gifted but unsuccessful composer. When the voice is still, the one firm basis for judgment is gone. The sooner memories are translated into words, the truer the words should be. When memories, too, are gone, words must suffice—the words of others, second-hand—and vicarious estimates are formed, as best they can be, in the dull and droning biographical way.

Records a Boon to Posterity

FORTUNATELY for posterity, as well as for the memory of Enrico Caruso, he is survived by a multitude of sound-reproducing records which include many impressive illustrations of all that was superb in the purely vocal phases of his art. Because of these, a much truer estimate can be formed of Caruso a century hence, than musical historiographers can shape, to-day, with respect to Rubini or Mario. Future generations can readily understand why the Caruso voice was so universally described as "golden," and why there was such widespread admiration of his breath-control and his skill in phrasing. They can catch more than a little of the fervor and emotional sweep of his singing, and can know even something of his mercurial personality. But, as Caruso was essentially a singer of opera, with all that this implies, they cannot base a complete evaluation on these purely vocal representations alone. The later Caruso, especially, cannot be justly appraised without first hand acknowledgment of his stagecraft, the visual elements which synchronized so convincingly with voice and vocal art in his last and noblest operatic characterization—*Eleazar* in "La Juive." Caruso died at a time when his interpretative and delineative powers were at their zenith, and when his artistic taste and skill in dramatic portraiture were being manifested as they had never been manifested before. If, in succeeding paragraphs, there are statements tending to establish retrogression in his vocal powers, these are to be construed as referring to the voice alone, and not to the utilization of it as a medium of song and of drama.

Three Distinct Periods

CARUSO, the supreme singer, had three—perhaps four—distinct periods, with marked differences in voice and style. America has noted three. A fourth might properly pertain to his early days in Italy, when, as he himself

confessed, his voice was so thin and frail that it was likened to a breeze blowing through an open window. His first American period was that subsequent to his début, when he sang as a lyric tenor, with a relatively light voice of a *timbre* that enchanted the ear. The second, when he greatly enlarged the volume of his tone, deepened it to a baritone quality, and was prodigal of tremendous top notes, has been called his "raw beef" period. The third and last, beginning about five years ago, found his upper voice somewhat impaired and the quality darkened throughout, but disclosed him a loftier artist and a far more admirable actor than ever before. No estimate of Caruso can safely ignore these changes in voice and style, and the Caruso of 1920 must be measured with a different yard-stick than either the Caruso of 1903 or the Caruso of 1910.

Reconstructing the Lyric Period

EVEN now, it is only with some difficulty that the essentials of the young Neapolitan who first flashed upon America at the opening of the season of 1903-04, can be recalled and something of his voice and style recaptured. That he did not at once establish himself as the greatest of world tenors is made clear by reference to the newspaper reviews

of that début. Three of the leading members of the critical areopagus to-day were functioning similarly the night of Monday, Nov. 23, 1903, when "Rigoletto" ushered in Mr. Conreid's first span of opera, as successor to Maurice Grau. What Mr. Krehbiel, Mr. Henderson and Mr. Finck wrote was mostly commendatory and in some measure prophetic, but the brevity and the mildness of what they said reads somewhat curiously to-day.

Mr. Krehbiel devoted most of his review to Mme. Sembrich, the *Gilda* of the cast (which also included Scotti as *Rigoletto*.) Caruso's *Duke* was accorded about seven lines. Mr. Henderson, after dealing with the other principals first, stated that "the new tenor made a thoroughly favorable impression and will probably grow into the favor of this public." He described the voice as "a pure tenor of fine quality and sufficient range and power. It is a smooth and mellow voice and without the typical Italian bleat." Of Caruso's art, he wrote that "Mr. Caruso has a natural and free delivery, and his voice carries well without forcing. He phrased his music tastefully and showed considerable refinement of style." Mr. Finck, who chronicled the fact that there was no applause when Caruso entered—"no one seemed to know him"—gave it as his opinion that "the

new tenor, Mr. Caruso, may safely be called the best *Duke* on the stage."

Not in Best Voice at Début

IT was pointed out, however, that Caruso was not altogether in his best voice the night of his American début. Two succeeding appearances scheduled for him during his first week at the Metropolitan were canceled, because he developed tonsillitis. In his place, Giuseppe Agostini, not a member of the company, but hastily enrolled as a substitute, sang in "Bohème" and the second "Rigoletto." The story of how the substitute demanded and received Caruso's fee was a choice newspaper morsel of the day.

In his Sunday column, Mr. Henderson wrote of Caruso again, saying: "He will become a sound favorite with the local public, which has not heard such an admirable Italian tenor within the memory of the young generation of opera goers. To be sure, he is not a Tamagno, who in certain things was unique. Tamagno was a robust tenor; Mr. Caruso is lyric. But his voice is by no means deficient in power." He took occasion to point out that Caruso "has the fault of all Italian tenors, the use of the *voix blanche*." Mr. Henderson called for thanksgiving, however, that Caruso used the "white voice" sparingly.

Caruso, himself, in an interview a number of years later, referred to criticisms which took him to task for his "white" tone.

"But you never sang with the 'white voice!'" he was asked.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I sang 'white' then. The voice, however, was growing rounder, getting more color, more of what you call body; a stronger voice, which is what the American public likes best."

Quality of Lyric Voice the Best

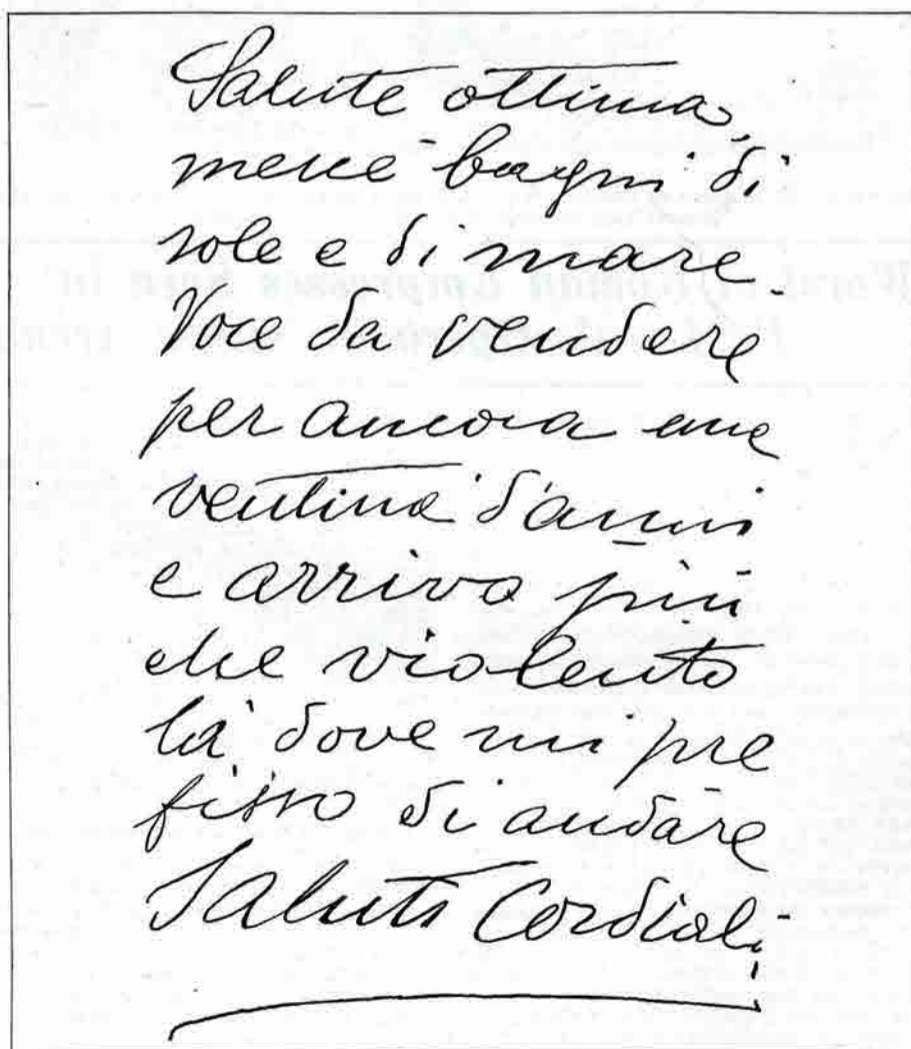
IN spite of those moments of whiteness, there are worshipers at the shrine of Caruso who believe that his tone had more of sublimation in those early years at the Metropolitan, than it was ever to possess again. It is their feeling that the development of the "rounder" and the "stronger" organ was at the cost of quality, and that Caruso's middle period, when the voice which Mr. Henderson first styled "lyric" (and which Grove refers to as a *tenore di mezzo carattere*) was transformed into a *tenore robusto* or even a *tenore di forza*—the classification accorded to Tamberlik and Tamagno—exacted penalties that became evident at the close of his career.

"Aïda," "Bohème," "Pagliacci" and "Traviata" were the other operas in which Caruso sang, in the weeks immediately following his American début. The magical quality of his tone began to assert its sway over all who heard. Of his singing in "Bohème," Mr. Henderson wrote: "Music of the fluently melodious and sentimental style of 'La Bohème' is admirably suited to Mr. Caruso's voice and method of singing. All the lovely qualities of his uncommonly beautiful voice are brought into prominence, and the few vices into which he falls in the delivery of tragic declamation are retired to the background. He is indeed an enchanting singer of such music as *Rodolfo's*."

Of his first *Radames* in "Aïda," Mr. Krehbiel said that it stirred "keener appreciation of his knowledge of the art of singing and invited still greater admiration for the superb beauty of his voice. The pleasure which his singing gives is exquisite, scarcely leaving room for captious questions touching his limitations."

After his first *Canio* in "Pagliacci," Mr. Finck remarked that "the opinion prevails generally that he is the best Italian tenor New York has heard since Campanini retired from the stage."

"Voice to Sell for Twenty Years," Wrote Caruso on Card to Friend



Facsimile of Postcard Sent by Caruso to Salvatore Fucito, His Accompanist and Friend. This Is One of the Last Communications from the Tenor to Reach This Country Before the Cable Announcing His Death. The Card Bears a Picture of a Bust of the Singer and the Message Reads: "In the Best of Health, Thanks to Sea and Sun Baths. I Have Voice to Sell for Another Twenty Years and I Reach with Vigor the Point for Which I Have Set Out. Cordial Greetings"