

Back to "Grand" Opera (In English!)

By PERCY HEMING.

The whole of my stage career, as distinct from concert and recital work, has seesawed rather curiously between "light" and "grand" opera; but the "grand" type was my first love and my first initiation into the world of the theatre; and I am tremendously glad that for the next few months the "grand" end of the seesaw is going to be on top!

My first stage appearance was in Sir Thomas Beecham's season at Covent Garden in 1915; and it was with him (after the inevitable interlude in the Army) that I had the honour of singing Kurwenal in "Tristan" the first time he conducted it, as well as Amfortas in "Parsifal" when first performed by his company at Covent Garden in 1919. Then the "light" end of the seesaw came uppermost; for I went to America to play Macheath in "The Beggar's Opera," and after eighteen months, came back to "grand opera." Mr. Boosey saw me as Scarpia at Covent Garden and offered me a part in "Lilac Time" (for some unaccountable reason, because the most sinister baritone role in the operatic gamut does not at first sight suggest Shober in the Schubert melange. However, both characters do carry a quizzing glass!) Then came Covent Garden and the B.N.O.C. again; then another tour of "Lilac Time" which has just finished for me; and, as I always turn to "grand" opera when I can, here I am, very glad to be associated with such a company (and audience) of enthusiasts, who are making such a splendid bid to establish opera in English for the people on a sound and lasting basis for the first time in our history.

Opera in English. Yes, that is the point. In Germany, all operas are sung in German; in France, all operas are sung in French. Obviously, of course, all operas are really most effective when they are given in the language of their origin; and obviously, of course, this can and should be done during the great International seasons at Covent Garden, which are so great and wonderful a feature of London musical life; but it is manifestly impossible to attempt to popularize opera on these lines, or to expect the British public at large to hear and to understand Italian one night, French the next, German the next and Russian as a sort of week-end effort. And unless the public at large can understand what is being sung and can comprehend how apt is the thought to the musical phrase, it will never really like grand opera.

It seems curious to me that by a vague but general assent the English language is considered unsuitable for opera. Its interwoven structure of Latin and Teutonic seems to me to make it ideally suited to be a sort of *via media* for the operatic enterprises of the future. I grant you there are some difficulties. Italian, for instance, is deficient in finals; it eliminates strong contrasts, and the vowels can easily be carried from note to note. The same thing applies to French; it is easy to glide imperceptibly from word to word. German, on the other hand, is extravagant with its consonants; and extravagance on the stage is always easier than simple naturalness. No doubt to sing well in English entails harder work than to sing well in some other tongues—but that is no reason why English singers should not try to do it. After all, "Tannhauser" sounds very much more queer in French than it does in the English translation, where so many words are near the German. Similarly, the effect of "Louise," or perhaps "Boheme" in German is quite extraordinary compared to an English rendering of the same work. Opera in America, for some incomprehensible reason, is hardly ever done in English, which, after all is the common language of the people, whatever their race and origin may have been. In America there

race and origin may have been. In America there have been fitful efforts to make opera a factor that counts in the life of the people; but there is nothing there which can be compared to the enterprises of the Carl Rosa or Moody-Manners companies, or of the Vic-Wells movement. I prophesy that the American and British publics will never be impressed by grand opera unless it is constantly sung, and sung well, in English. Bad diction is nothing more than laziness and bad production.

I am not one of those people who consider that the music in an opera is the one and only thing that matters. Directly you mount an opera on the stage, you challenge the optic, as well as the aural-sense; and if opera artists can't act by nature, well, they must go to somebody who can help them—and there are precious few people who can't be helped!

The whole tradition of opera is, I believe, changing; we cannot go on doing the same old "business" in the same old stock company way. The younger generation that is growing up is very critical; it knows good acting from bad. Perhaps this is one result of the influence of the "movies." After all, in every little town in England, the people can see the greatest actors in the world on the screen; and consciously or unconsciously they come to understand movement and balance and the "sense of the stage." That, I fancy, is why oratorio as a popular amusement is so patently on the wane. It is too static.

It might be argued that some of the older operas are also too static ever to be favourites with this generation, however lovely the music may be. That is, to a certain extent, true. Well, in those cases where it is quite impossible for any artist to be natural and convincing, he must conventionalize the action; he must take up as beautiful a pose as is possible and hold it as long as possible. We must have lights on the singers during those long arias when the other people on the stage have nothing they can possibly do which can help the illusion, and darkness over the rest. (I am told that Sumner Austin has already done something of this kind with certain of the older ballad operas with marked success, and I entirely agree. I shall be interested to see one of my own cherished theories worked out by someone else.)

Now Puccini (in whose "La Tosca" I made my bow to you) is the operatic actor's composer par excellence; he gives his interpreters such lovely situations. I am looking forward to Doctor Bartolo, too, in "The Barber of Seville." Bartolo isn't perhaps a very showy part; but it is the clou of the whole opera; and all the other characters bound and rebound off him in their attempts to outwit him. Wolfram is another line of country altogether; and so is the Father in "Hansel and Gretel"; but variety is the spice of life; and it is complete joy to me to have all these great classic parts before me, and to look forward to playing them in this friendly and enthusiastic atmosphere.

In the Vic-Wells company, you see, when a tenor is in a hole and wants a little help, he goes to another tenor; and a baritone goes to another baritone.

Believe me, that is not usual!