

# WHY DO THE 400 LIKE WAGNER?

**N**EW YORK has a large number of strange things. Chief among these is, the opera Siegfried, which afforded me three comfortable naps at \$3.00 a seat a few days ago at the Metropolitan Opera. My seat was up on the fourth story, two galleries from the top, named the Dress Circle, in contrast to the two tiers of boxes and loges immediately below which are the undress circles reserved for the 400. These celestials, with J. P. Morgan in the centre of the grand tier, pay out each several thousands a year in order to allow common people to enjoy grand opera on a scale known nowhere else in the world at present.

Siegfried was scheduled to begin at 1.30. And it did. Conductor Artur Bodanzky, from Vienna, would sooner be an hour late for dinner than one second behind in starting one of the Nibelungen Ring, of which Siegfried is No. 3, just prior to Gotterdamering. And at 1.35 there were 3,900 people from top to bottom of the greatest opera house in the world. To watch that horde of elect and unelect crush in from Broadway and 6th Avenue and 42nd Street is one of the many free shows of New York. The plutocrats who built that opera house away back in the '80's knew that the way to get New York to pay for opera was to interest Broadway. And the way to interest Broadway is to be on it. Otherwise the Opera House might have been put in the middle of Central Park or down near the Statue of Liberty. I noticed one of our Cabinet Ministers get out of a limousine on Broadway and go in here. I think it was the Minister of Militia, who in Toronto is a very good Methodist.

I admire the Metropolitan Opera. It is the one big competitor of the Hippodrome in New York, and though it holds about 1,500 fewer people, it draws more money for each performance than the Hippodrome does in three. Because it costs about \$20,000 to put on a big opera there, outside of the rent for the premises; probably more. But the 400 cheerfully pay the deficit because they like to see the people upstairs have a good time—watching the 400, who are sometimes the biggest show in the house.

Yes, opera is popular in New York. It is no church. It is the one immortal luxury that makes the board walks of Broadway look sometimes like the grand Midway to the gates of glory. The house itself reminds you of one of those gilded old chariots, all stuck over with corbels of gold. It was built to be a Louis XIV. enlargement of de luxe. It reeks of unconquerable opulence from the 100-foot ceiling to the bottom of the great orchestra pit, which is as big as a country church. I'm glad they built it that way before the modern faddist had a chance to make it look like a play mounted by Gordon Craig or W. B. Yeats. In that synagogue of splendid sin you may think yourself back in the middle ages of the '80's, when this marvelous building that occupies a whole block along mid-Broadway gave New York a chance to show that Europe had nothing bigger in art architecture. Since that original million or so was put into the building, the value of the land it occupies has run up into several millions. And the amount of money spent in that box office has run into more millions than anybody outside of the Rockefeller-Carnegie-Morgan crowd can stock up against his name in a ledger.

**B**UT as to Siegfried. The overture was about as long as some of Dickens' preambles to his novels. Premonitions of the bear, the Nibelung man, Fatne the dragon and Brunnhilde. Curtain goes up on an underground scene; a smithy, an anvil and a dog-faced, skin-coated man. This fellow is the Nibelung. You know the story—all New York does—about the Rhine gold. That gold would have been in New York now but for the British blockade. It was a secret hoard, guarded by the dragon and coveted by the Nibelung Mimeo, who had brought up this young Siegfried in the underworld, son of demi-gods, a great warrior, a wonderful young super-German who could break any of the Nibelung's hand-made swords with his little finger, and wanted a

*Metaphysical Tommyrot is Popular on Broadway at High Prices. Sleepy German Stuff. Modern Opera is Better*

BY THE MUSIC EDITOR

supernatural sword, as Germans always do.

And the whole of the first act was spent in orchestral and lyric gibberish about this sword which Siegfried himself tempered at the forge, pulling down the bellows and belching flames; and talking about his father and mother, whom he had never known. I'm sure it was good music, because it put me to sleep.

The second act was quite enchantingly mysterious: a deep, dark forest where Tafner the dragon was to meet Siegfried the youth with the super-sword. Here also was Alberic, with the long beard and the little bird that told Siegfried about the Nibelung's plot to poison him and get the Rhine gold, and about Brunnhilde, the enchanted daughter of the gods, in her ring of fire. For this Siegfried, who had never seen many people, had never been in love. So he must have found Broadway a strange place. Siegfried blew a little horn. In came the dragon; a beauteous beast, with scales like a shingle roof, a pair of large green eyes and nostrils that blew out green smoke at Siegfried, who, of course, slew him with the super-sword. That was a sublime moment. None of the Germans in the audience seemed to realize that England went through that dragon-killing spasm about 2,000 years ago, when they had St. George and the dragon.

Speaking musically, the orchestra and the soloists considerably improved in this act. Otto Goritz, the basso, as Alberic, was always immense. Sembach, as Siegfried, piped away very melodiously and at times quite thrillingly for a German tenor. But Act II was a very slow piece of business compared

to the best modern stuff. It was hard to realize that anybody ever got seriously alarmed over this phase of Wagner. Somewhere in this act Schumann Heink sung a tableau in the gloom. Vocally, very good, but pretty sleepy lyrics. In anything but German opera Schumann Heink would have

passed this up as too dull for utterance. But, of course, great Wagner must never be accused of being dull. Oh, no!

Act III. was a decided improvement. The scenic investiture was stupendously fine. Here Siegfried meets Brunnhilde. She is supposed to be a sleeping warrior. Nobody but a super-Siegfried ever could have been fooled so completely. He releases the warrior to find a beauteous maiden; the Brunnhilde, about whom the little bird had told him in the forest. He falls violently in love with her. He gives her a kiss that lasts about 90 seconds—impossible! She awakes. The Brunnhilde motif sounds in the orchestra. She is startled into another world. The divine maiden has been kissed by a man. She is no longer divine. The solos and duet of discovery are very fine. Gadski is, of course, a superb Brunnhilde; always has been. On this occasion she rose to her great height and seemed as young as she was twenty years ago.

The curtain went down four hours after the overture began. The restaurant amidships was crammed once in the interval—more than a thousand people being served. Four hours of Wagner. Supposedly great. The foggiest metaphysical rubbish I have been at in many a day. No doubt Broadway liked it. In spite of the fact that every stitch about the thing was German, I liked it, too—once in a while. But all there is in Siegfried could be expressed by a smart, modern opera composer in about one hour and a half. Why do the 400 like Wagner? Heaven knows. It can't be the stories, nor the acting, nor most of the solos. It must be some of the scenery and parts of the music. Probably it's the orchestra. Sometimes there's very little else. But any one who doubts that Germany is a nation of un-grown-ups ought to hear Siegfried.

## Modern Opera Better

**M**ARION LESCAUT is far different. With all the Wagnerian fogs blown out of the big opera house along with the growling, underworld heroics and the ranting demigods, we are at once into an atmosphere that sparkles with joy. Some one behind me whispers, "They're going to pull some sad stuff before they get through." But at present it's all the other way. A jolly party is on stage at an inn. There is a sprightly chorus. Everything has a choral background. We are relieved of those interminable Wagnerian duos, mere conversations in semi-lyric form. Puccini knows the stimulating value of a chorus without robbing the orchestra. Of course Manon is a real opera, while Siegfried is a music drama. For all human purposes commend us to the opera. Manon may not be an ideal opera; it is somewhat too sad. But it has the spirit and the light and the cordiality of Broadway. It comes close to common human living. It does so without sacrificing solos, duos or orchestra. In fact, it uses them all, even the orchestra to greater purpose. It leaves a little to the imagination. Manon never goes to sleep like Siegfried. It requires no effort of the imagination. It tells a story of real action in more or less modern times. It may be harder to follow as a story without the libretto. But even without the story it is good, bracing opera.

Story may be sketched in a few words: Romantic maiden—Manon—destined but not doomed to a convent. In the diligence in the way to the convent is a rich old roue Geronto, who desires Manon. Lescaut, the brother, is not anxious to have Manon go to the convent. He needs money, and rather favours the attentions of the old roue. But Manon falls in love with an impecunious young blade named des Greux—whose adventures told by the Abbe Prevost in a novel form the basis for the opera. She



Elsie Ferguson, at the Hudson Theatre, delights select audiences with Shirley Kaye.