

Grand Opera from Montreal

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

FOR the two weeks ending last Saturday, Toronto paid out for grand opera performances somewhere between thirty and forty thousand dollars. The productions cost a few men in Montreal about twenty thousand dollars more than the box office receipts. For twelve weeks previous to the Toronto engagement the Montreal Opera Co. succeeded in beguiling Montrealers to part with a few hundred thousand dollars for this same form of entertainment. And both in Montreal and Toronto, as well as in Ottawa and Quebec, this is proving to be a very pleasing sort of beguilement.

Perhaps if a visiting Britisher or European were searching for some one proof that Canada had got beyond the mere colonial stage he might find it in the fact that for two seasons now music-lovers in four of our chief cities have been spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to hear operas which, when produced by the Montreal Opera Co., cost many hundreds of thousands more. A city capable of producing men like Col. F. S. Meighen who do not mind dropping large fortunes into a very large hole must be something of a world city. Which Montreal is.

The Montreal Opera Co. is financed in Montreal. Its home is there. The men who, with Col. Meighen as the chief backer are behind it, made their money in Montreal; which now they are beginning to spend for the edification of at least four cities—not including Winnipeg and Vancouver. There is something ostensibly magnificent about this. In the whole world there is no other people of less than eight, or even three times as many millions, that support a season of grand opera. In the United States three cities have such a luxury: New York, Chicago, and Boston. Up till two years ago Chicago had no grand opera season and got its operas direct from New York. So with Boston. And it is not so many years since the New York four hundred built the Metropolitan Opera House and began to give Gotham the most sumptuous grand opera season in the world. It is about five years since Oscar Hammerstein opened his new Manhattan Opera House to give New York what the Metropolitan had never produced. This year for the first time the Manhattan is closed and Oscar has spent a million or so on his great London Opera House, by means of which he hopes to do for the proletariat of the world's biggest city what Covent Garden does for the wealthy.

So the opera movement is spreading. Now we have got it in Canada—on a very large scale. Up till two years ago Canadian cities imported all their grand opera from the United States with an occasional visit of some cheap, mediocre company from England. Well-remembered is the magnificent experiment of one Henry Savage to produce grand operas of all sorts in English; his two seasons of really splendid production in Canadian cities, exploiting Wagner and De Puccini and Verdi. It was said then that the Savage offerings compared very favourably in ensemble with those at the Metropolitan though somewhat inferior in the great fixed stars that cost from one thousand to twenty-five hundred dollars a night.

The same may truthfully be said of the Montreal Opera Co. Col. Meighen's financial backing and the good impresariship of Mr. Jeanotte have got together an ensemble of really fine artists, choristers, bandsmen and stage managers; a company who could go into any theatre in the world and do themselves credit. No one has pretended to complain of the art merit of these performances. No one could possibly kick at the price; when the highest priced seat was two dollars and a half, and for fifty cents one could hear Puccini, Gounod, Bizet, Charpentier and Massenet, in the "gods."

The attempt was to give Canadians a taste of the best going in grand opera—within certain limits, and excluding Wagner. The experiment has magnificently succeeded. Col. Meighen deserves the thanks of all his patrons for making it succeed. He has proved that Montreal is not without imagination. A city which is able to pile up a civic debt of \$130 per head of its population, to come into the half million class with almost a village government, to be the world's greatest example of a truly bilingual city, and at the same time to produce the Montreal Opera Co.—is a city that no man could call merely diligent or dull.

Comparisons are not always odious. Time was when Toronto cavilled at Montreal because in the latter city was no such choir as the Mendelssohn Choir. Montreal critics abused the Mendelssohn Choir, which as a rule they had not heard, or if so with some prejudice. The Mendelssohn Choir has

never attempted to prove to Montreal that Toronto could produce one of the greatest choruses in the world. Montreal has never attempted to evolve one as good; and perhaps never will. Conditions are radically different. On a musical basis the two chief cities of Canada are as radically distinctive as they are in people, in architecture and in ideas. The difference is admirably summed up in the Montreal Opera Co. and the Mendelssohn Choir; one an aggregation of outsiders—and some native Canadians—imported from New York and Europe at an immense cost to produce grand opera at a loss; the other an aggregation of home talent organized to give the greatest choral works ever written at an annual profit to the Society and in competition with the best choruses in New York, Boston and Chicago.

However, Toronto has proved that she is not bigoted in the matter of music; that while she spends every year about twenty-five thousand dollars on the great choir, she is not averse to spending a few thousands more on the opera company from Montreal. The audiences in Toronto were capacity audiences—enthusiastic, somewhat critical and at times rather cold. But next year instead of two weeks—as compared to one week last season—there will probably be three or four weeks of grand opera by the Montreal company in Toronto. Already to the Board of Directors have been added certain Toronto gentlemen, with Sir Edmund Walker, honorary president of the Mendelssohn Choir, as the chief representative.

And this is because the Montreal Opera Co. really satisfied what seems to be a legitimate demand for such entertainments in a city rapidly becoming cosmopolitan enough to want the best of everything. There is not space here to give a critical appreciation of all the performances. In fact the writer of this attended only two—Faust and Carmen. These were both given almost magnificent presentations. In the former the chief defect was the principal tenor who gave rather a juvenile rendering of the Faust role; its chief glory was the superb Mephisto role of Huberty the great French basso-cantante—as compelling an artist as ever came on the grand opera boards in Canada, unless one should accept Winfred Goff, who did the same role for the Savage Co. Any other defect arose from the gloriously human interpretation of one Charles Gounod, who wrote the opera to the immortal drama of Goethe. Most of that is obvious in the first scene, where Faust, the quavering old philosopher, bursts forth into a robust tenor solo to a full orchestral accompaniment. This, to say

the least, is not dramatic. Perhaps grand operas should not be dramatic. Many of them are not. Wagner's music dramas seldom are. However, Gounod succeeded in a musical interpretation of Faust on an operatic basis—so well, that if Wolfgang Goethe could hear the same he would perhaps turn in his grave at the audacity of such a "painting of the lily." The same might be said of Verdi's "Otello." It is a matter for the art psychologist to say in how far music can ever be employed to heighten the effect of true drama in the shape of grand opera. In Faust many of the scenes are infinitely better sung. In many, perhaps most cases, they are more satisfying from a dramatic point of view if merely spoken with appropriate acting. Once, however, you admit the dramatic incongruity of Mephisto appearing in the streets of a German town, there is really no jar to the imagination in hearing the devil sing.

With Carmen the case is entirely different. If Bizet's masterpiece were spoken and not sung, a corporal's guard would yawn and listen. Carmen is a pure opera. To the thinnest sort of a dramatic yarn it adds gorgeous stage setting and most brilliant music—sometimes reminiscent of Handel. The character of Carmen holds the splendid trifle together and attracts the crowd. Carmen is not a common woman. She would be uncomfortable in any well-conducted home. She is therefore fascinating on the opera stage; bizarre, devilish but yet a good deal of a human woman and infinitely better than Salome. So we all cheerfully pass up Carmen as a really great opera that does not and could not pretend to be anything else—not even a good drama.

Now they are saying rather furtive things about Charpentier's "Louise," which was twice given in Toronto by the same company. The writer of this did not hear Louise; but some say that the story if translated into English would have caused the Morality Department to lose sleep.

Perhaps grand opera should not attempt to be moral. Possibly its mission may sometimes be to sugar-coat the immoral. Music is such a deucedly elusive and indefinable thing that it becomes a sort of subterfuge to say when it is employed for immoral purposes or when it becomes itself immoral. Some say music is never anything but moral. They argue that music is a divine art; that it should never be used to exploit aught but the true and the beautiful. But it seems likely that the old diatonic scale with its thirteen lurking semitones is capable of being distorted a good many ways that would not be satisfying in a church hymn or a good anthem. At the same time many of us have heard so-called gospel songs that were a hundred times more immoral than anything in grand opera, even than Wagner or Strauss.

A Man and His Hobby

By DONALD B. SINCLAIR

THE story of the Montreal Opera Co. is that of a man and his hobby. Boston has its Col. Higginson, whose munificence mainly supports the finest symphony orchestra in America. Montreal has her Col. Meighen, who, with a few other men, is responsible for what is in some respects the best opera company ever seen in Canada.



LIEUT.-COL. F. S. MEIGHEN, "The Man Behind" the Montreal Opera Company.

Colonel Meighen is a son of the late Mr. Robt. Meighen, the Montreal mill king. He was born at Perth, Ontario; educated at McGill. He is a tall, clean, quick man, who glides across the floor to answer the telephone or to attend to some business at the other end of the room with silent, swift and sure poise. Another thing about the Colonel—he looks always in the pink of condition. Probably that is because he is so fond of riding horses and playing polo; then, of

course, too, he is a graduate of that splendid physical training school, the Militia, having been Lieutenant-Colonel of the 5th Royal Highlanders. When his father died, he succeeded to several millions. He showed sanity in the use of his patrimony by first trying to fill the gap left by his father on the boards of some of the great industries with which

he was so long connected; and then bringing to fruition some of his own youthful dreams which had been dozing in the back of his head. One of these was music.

The Colonel loves music. Well, what Highlander doesn't? The Colonel had long been interested in grand opera as it is produced in London, Berlin and Paris. In these cities grand opera receives its support from state subsidy or by means of aid from private individuals. Because of high salaries required to be paid for singers, expense of scenery and costumes, and the limited audience to whom music of the first class appeals, grand opera has not been, generally speaking, a profitable business for private enterprise. Its most successful production has been a matter of state effort or patriotic generosity.

Two years ago, Colonel Meighen became convinced that Canada was quite as well entitled as the United States to a grand opera of its own. He called in Sir Rodolphe Forget, Sir Montague Allan and other Montreal men of money, who agreed with him. Colonel Meighen did not stop with talking. He and his associates put up a huge sum of money, engaged singers, and the result is the Montreal Opera Company.

Last season the Company had a successful premiere. But this season they eclipsed expectations. For three months, they sang at His Majesty's, Montreal, and then visited Quebec, Toronto and Ottawa. During that time they produced two French and two Italian operas which had never before been heard in America.

Col. Meighen thinks that the success of grand opera is only a matter of education in this country. The Montreal Opera he hopes will become a national institution; and he is very optimistic over the fact that five of this year's company are Canadians.