

Grand Opera in Canada

By HECTOR CHARLESWORTH



The French Basso, Albert Huberty, as Mephisto, doing the Serenade in "Faust."



Carmen Melis, Soprano, who will sing the roles of "Thais" and "Butterfly."



Beatrice La Palme, the Celebrated Canadian diva, as "Rosina," in "The Barber of Seville."

A FEW years ago the answer to the question, "What are the possibilities of Grand Opera in Canada?" would have been, "None"; if the average man familiar with theatrical and musical conditions had been asked to reply to it. Within the past three years, however, contingencies have arisen which have changed the entire situation and which make the question a pertinent one for discussion. For many years the chief cities of Eastern Canada had been subject to sporadic outbreaks of grand opera, contributed by travelling companies organized in New York. Some of these productions were very good indeed (though in such cases the prices charged were of necessity abnormal), but in many instances they were ragged and bad. When a theatrical manager in Montreal or Toronto found that his New York agents had booked a grand opera aggregation for him, he at once anticipated a losing week for his own theatre accompanied by a request at the end of it for a loan to enable the company to get to the next town or to assist in sending the stranded singers back to New York. In fact grand opera was viewed with disfavour by those interested in the business end of the theatrical business and with complete indifference by the general public. Even in instances when the late Maurice Grau would send from the Metropolitan Opera House a well equipped organization with half a dozen of his best stars, the sums which it was necessary to pay the latter practically eliminated all profit from the enterprise. This situation was by no means peculiar to Canada, but extended to all the smaller cities of the United States. Even so fine an enterprise as Mr. Henry W. Savage's English grand opera company, which was most cordially supported in this country, was found to be so unprofitable on the continent taken as a whole, that this astute manager abandoned his really meritorious effort to give artistic productions to the best class of works.

Let it be said at the outset that any hope of profit from grand opera in this or any other country is purely fantastic. Grand opera has never paid a dividend anywhere except under very exceptional circumstances, and has no status whatever as a permanent speculation. To acquire any permanent hold on the community it must be endowed; and it is the fact that Canada now has a well endowed grand opera company, directed by a small group of strong-willed and resolute men that has changed the entire situation in this country, and especially in the city of Montreal. One alludes to the Montreal Opera Company, of which Mr. Albert Clerk Jeannotte, a distinguished musician of mingled Scottish and French-Canadian lineage, is Director-general with a group of distinguished capitalists, headed by Lieut.-Col. Meighen, an unselfish musical enthusiast, at his back. Through the public services of these gentlemen grand opera seems to be assured of definite possibilities and no uncertain future in Eastern Canada at any rate. Whether it will get a foothold in the Canadian West within the present generation is at least doubtful. Geographical conditions—in other words our magnificent distances—militate against its extension thither.

GENERALLY speaking, we owe the development of grand opera in the East to the fact that Montreal is not only one of the wealthiest cities of its size in the world, but one that in some degree lies out of the range of convenient circuits for large travelling organizations. This latter fact is not without its compensations, because last season Montreal playgoers were better served from an artistic standpoint than any other city in this country. They enjoyed not only three months of grand opera seriously and meritoriously produced, but a two months' visit of Miss Horniman's players, probably the best stock company in the English-speaking world, which produces only pieces of intellectual quality. That is to say, Montrealers on practically every night for five months last season enjoyed something worthy of serious critical attention. What other city of similar size on this continent can make a like boast?

It was the desire of Col. Meighen and his friends to give their home city worthy entertainment that led them to back Mr. Jeannotte in his ambitious enterprise. From boyhood the latter had cherished the dream of directing a great Canadian national enterprise and some day perhaps the story of how, from the nucleus of a small band of opera singers in hard luck, he has built up in three years the splendid, all-round organization now known as the Montreal Opera Company will be written. When the enterprise was first announced, at the outset of the season of 1910-11, it was not seriously regarded even by Montrealers themselves; but as the season progressed it turned out to be precisely what music lovers and theatre lovers, especially among the French population, had been waiting for. Wealthy men, whose previous interest in the theatre has been limited to musical comedy, suddenly woke up to the fact that grand opera, if an expensive luxury, was a delightful one.

To broaden the scope of the enterprise the company was sent on a tour of several cities and it must frankly be confessed that this tour was most disastrous. It seemed im-

possible to eliminate from people's minds the idea that it was merely a company of amateurs. However, Col. Meighen was resolved to give the scheme a fair show. The second season a company stronger in every way was provided and was successful beyond expectations with the Montreal public. When it went on tour there was the same story to tell. The people of Toronto especially took the enterprise to their hearts in the fortnight spent in that city, Quebec and Ottawa made a much handsomer response than during the previous year.

Last year's season was so successful that the directors have been encouraged to plan a series of productions on a much more ambitious scale. It is always discouraging to a man, however altruistic in his motives, and unselfish in his devotion to art, to feel that he is giving the public what it doesn't want. Any movement of the kind to be really valuable to the community must rest on the broad basis of public support. There is every evidence that the Montreal Opera Company has won its way with the people at large, and therefore its backers can face the inevitable losses involved with a feeling of cheerfulness.

WHILE the director-general, Mr. Jeannotte, is an enthusiast and an optimist, a Scotch strain has prevented him from "biting off more than he can chew," if the phrase may be permitted. At present he is confining himself to the production of the best French and Italian works, though Wagner will no doubt come later, when the company has the permanent home that certain supporters of wealth project for it. It has been found that owing to the nature of its population, Montreal prefers the modern French works; whereas the public of Toronto and Ottawa shows a weakness for the Italian repertoire and the old favourites.

This year, in addition to familiar operas like "Carmen," "Faust," "Lakme," "Cavalleria Rusticana," "La Boheme," "Madam Butterfly," "La Tosca," "Trovatore," "Rigoletto," and "The Barber of Seville," the company will do Verdi's "Aida," which, because of the vast equipment required to present it properly, is seldom seen outside of the great cities; Charpentier's "Louise," which many regarded as the most interesting of last season's offerings; absolute novelties like Godard's "Vivandiere," Leoncavallo's "Zaza," and Massenet's "Cendrillon," and operas which are to all intents and purposes novelties to the people of this country, like Massenet's "Herodiade," his "Thais," and his "Jongleur de Notre Dame," Bizet's "Pêcheurs de Perles," Erlanger's "Noel," and Offenbach's "Contes d'Hoffman." These will be interpreted with a first-class scenic equipment and a first-class chorus and orchestra, but by a much more distinguished array of principals than in the past. The conductors, Agide Jacchia, a man of genius in the Italian field, and Louis Hasselmans, an expert in modern French opera, have been retained; and the membership of the company includes such famous women as Louise Edvina, Esther Ferrabini, Elizabeth Amsden, Evelyn Scotney, Carmen Melis, Maria Gay, Beatrice La Palme, Maria Claessens, Bice Delva, Yvonne Courso and Jeska Swartz. The corps of tenors numbers eleven and includes such famous men as Giovanni Zenatello, Giovanni Sacchetti, Enrico Aresoni and Leon Lafitte. The basses and baritones include the great Huberty and two newcomers, Edouard Lankow and James Goddard, who are said to equal him in vocal power, Rodolfo Fornari, Natale Cervi and many others of European fame and experience. With such an organization ever growing and assured of ample financial support the possibilities of grand opera in this country are indeed infinite. It has, for instance, been found necessary in response to public demand to extend the Toronto visit to the term of three weeks, and the interest of the Canadian public in the enterprise is by no means limited to the cities where the company appears. Already the enterprise is winning support from many outside towns, and unquestionably its influence will spread widely.

The Necromancer Nikisch

NIKISCH, the musically omniscient; he the weaver of spells, the focus of traditions from Bach to the end of the beginning; the Hungarian rhapsody set in a Titan brain: rhythm with all its nuances, fire with all its consuming; passion with its poetry; the universal Palette of the modern orchestra; to whom a score is a superfluity and a band an opportunity: when the magnified picture of music, the drama of sound, the apotheosis of ultimate meaning, the pathos of profundity, the jocundity of the universal, the evolution of an idea, the absolute All of Music by interpretation, make him also a creator, and the musically omniscient Nikisch.

This was how the performance of the London Symphony Orchestra, under Nikisch, prompted one person to write. The language is rather mysterious.

