

# THE CANADIAN MUSIC AND DRAMA.

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## The Canadian Music and Drama,

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### THE QUESTION OF ENUNCIATION.

The subject of bad enunciation with vocal artists is one which crops up incidentally through the various critiques of a season. Reference is made especially to English speaking singers in the English tongue. The importance of French, German and Italian by vocalists is by no means underestimated, but with native born Americans can hardly be accepted as primary. When an American girl or youth begins to sing we would take it that charity in the matter of languages should rightly begin at home.

The fact also remains uppermost that a distinctly developed enunciation in any one language means a simpler mastery over the syllables of another.

We have concert after concert of English songs given here by professionals during a season. We have also—worse hope—class after class of pupils from first-rate voice teachers brought forward to sing us lyrics in the English tongue, from neither of whom can we extract a syllable of meaning. Absolute care is taken by the teachers in the matter of tone production. The study of the text and the coloring of tone in sympathetic adaptation to it is made a subject of equal care, but the clear and telling delivery of this text, by which alone an audience can comprehend and appreciate its appropriateness or beauty of its vocal setting, is growing more and more an affair of negligence with the teaching world. From out of the thousand vocal classes of our metropolis, those who sing distinctly enough to be understood might almost be numbered on our fingers.

It is of no practical consequence that a pupil has an innate dramatic conception of the meaning of a song, if he cannot make it patent to an audience through his utterance, their tranquil tender phrases may have to do with the

innocent babble of green fields or with those thoughts beneath which a well of tears is prone to lie, their impassioned climaxes may mean equally a rage of atmospheric elements or the tumultuous ardors of a love. How can an audience know if they do not tell them? And because the teachers and pupils know so thoroughly well between them just what the lyric tale is all about, they begin to forget more and more the necessity to tell.

Our episodes of English opera confirm most emphatically this imperfection of enunciation. Except in rare cases or in incoherent fragments can anyone tell what on earth the members of an English opera company are singing about? At the present moment there is being initiated in the courts a suit by a singer against a manager for breach of contract. The singer pleads an engagement for a number of nights to sing leading roles in English opera. The manager admits the contract, but states that it was violated not by him, but by the singer, who sang Italian instead of English at the first performance. Now, the artist in question was not heard on this occasion, but if we are to judge from contemporaneous example, the manager is pretty apt to have it his own way, as it would be hard to pick a jury of twelve good listeners from an audience who might aver with positiveness that they had been listening to any one language in particular. Judging from average experience of the enunciation of home trained English singers it would be quite a coup on the manager's part to decide even on the Italian. Nothing but an air trumpet in the wings off-times would convince us where the half formed stifled syllables we hear have had their birth-place.

We all know the potent effects sometimes gained by a singer of medium voice, who can tell his song-story with a meaning over the singer of more brilliant organ, whose bad enunciation leaves the tale a mystery. A notable success has been scored during this past season by two or three teachers who have paid strict attention to this enunciation. Slender vocal material has been made to do marvelous duty in garbing intelligently a distinct sympathetic tale, where larger voices have had the *raison d'être* of all their brilliancy and warmth and color satisfactorily explained through their clearly delivered text. But these cases were marked exceptions. The general idea within the studio seems to be that so long as the idea is mutually understood there, nobody outside needs to know anything whatever about it.

Teachers should muster forces and turn their active attention to seeing that their pupils enunciate with purity and distinctness. The poorest teacher we have would be ashamed not to give upon question an intelligent definition of a song or ballad—a story, usually in verse, which has been set to music. With ninety-five per cent. of them where goes the story? They let it be buried at the back of their pupils' palates, converting that musical hope of a vast majority, an English song, into a fraudulent misnomer. There is not any English about it, any more than there is Egyptian or Javanese, and the same pupil who turns English into so ungrateful a verbal mystery will not be likely to improve himself when it comes to the Italian aria or the German Lied.

After the matter of enunciation there is much left desirable in the effect of pronunciation. We cannot escape from the fact that where the articulation is at times good the accent of singers is sadly lacking in euphony and refinement. There have been singers with us within a few months who having quite mastered enunciation, retain a pronunciation thin and hard and disturbingly commonplace in flavor. Some of them sang very well in French and Italian, troling with mellifluous roundness certain consonants which in English were given with the flattest effect. It is a hard matter to reconcile that singers with a true musical ear who turn richly and lusciously the Italian and French letter "R" will sing the same in English after a manner closely resembling the London costermonger. But it is the case, and artists who have lent their tongues flexibly to the musical possibilities of a foreign language are frequently sadly lacking in their own. The facts are simply that they study the foreign language with a musical sympathy as something new, while their ear has through carelessness and abuse become comparatively deadened to the harmonies of their own, in which the slurs and end impoverished syllables which mark their conversational tone loom up through their song without any effort at enrichment or disguise.

But herein lies the province of teachers; and how large a field lies ready to their hand! First, let them teach every syllable to be unmistakably articulate, then let them teach the pupil how to make this clear diction harmonious and refined. At the present stage of matters this sounds like a hasty invitation to a vocal millennium, but it is in reality no more than a suggestion for consistent attention to what should be primary causes in the singer's art. Al-