

MORE ITALIAN OPERA

NOTWITHSTANDING the great amount of talk, even in Italy, of a "crisis of the opera," the only musical events which still succeed in vanquishing the indifference of the public are the opening nights of new operas, particularly if these are by composers of great renown. Two of the more eminent Italian composers have recently faced the fire of the footlights: Ottorino Respighi and G. Francesco Malipiero, the first having long ago placed himself at the head of the party which works with tradition alone, the second always orientated, and with a mature viewpoint which is constantly attracted by new forms of art.

With the opera *La Fiamma*, given at the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in Rome the twenty-third of January this year under the direction of the composer, Respighi programmatically reaffirmed his credo, of late centered in drama, and presented us with an opera tailored in a distinctive style, and with certain clearly strophic parts. The finales were prepared, and the work was constructed with an eye to gradation of effects, the orchestra

being well subordinated to the song. One cannot deny that his exceptional facility has again greatly aided him. This work differed in its conception of ensemble and in the language used from the earlier *La Campana Sommersa* and *Belfagor*, especially the latter, which seemed to offer Respighi motives more appropriate to his musical nature. The taste of the Bolognese composer has something in common with that of most of the artists who worked between the close of the last century and the outbreak of the War: d'Annunzio-like, it clings to the decorative and precious, it allows itself to be seduced by tricky words and rhymes. It is a pompous and hyper-refined taste, daily growing more foreign to the new generation. Whoever knows the more celebrated instrumental compositions of Respighi, from the *Fontana di Roma* to the *Trittico Botticelliano*, will understand that the attribute d'Annunzio-like may be a purely qualifying one in no way derogatory: it marks an artistic epoch, a style, a manner of living and creating which was nourished by those who, in the painful times during and after the War, sought to escape from it. This fundamental note appears in many guises in the varied operatic career of Respighi, from *Semirâma* (1910) to *La Campana Sommersa* (1927), from *Belfagor* (1923) to *Maria Egiziaca* (1932). There is always an extrinsic motive which gives the impulse to this musician's fancy: barbarism or mysticism, Nordic legend or Southern buffoonery, these are only pictorial pretexts on a smaller or larger scale, superbly painted and sumptuously framed. Yet in spite of the fact that in this latest opera there is shown a certain ability to bring about an intimacy with the characters, it is clear that the composer has not made the best of his dramatic material.

The librettist of *La Fiamma* has used as subject a Scandinavian play by Hans Wiers Jensen, (shown in English under the title of *The Witch*, and in Italian as *Anna Peters*, from the name of the principal character) and has transported it willy-nilly into Byzantine Ravenna of the late Seventh Century. In this way the drama, strange and unbelievable, was able to use as setting the marvelous polychromy of the mosaics of Santo Vitale, and gave the composer an opportunity to write some of his most brilliant symphonic pages. In general, it must be added,

it is by orchestral means that he succeeds in best characterizing dramatic situation (the horror of Sylvana, daughter of the sorceress, who feels surging within her the same powers of diabolical evocation as her mother who has been burned at the stake; the delicacy and freshness of the love felt for her by the timorous young stepson Donello; the anguish and approaching madness in the last scene at the trial of Sylvana, accused by her mother-in-law of the murder of her husband.) On the other hand, save for a few rare moments, the vocal parts and the lyrical impetus are not particularly personal, even though they always conserve a nobility of line. It is made clear once again that Respighi's sensitivity is essentially instrumental and that the vocal expression rather than developing a great and ardent emotion remains on the contrary cold and unconcerned (consider for example the negative effect of the voice's entrance at the arrival of Donello in the first act, after the heated instrumental arioso), or else reëchoes the typical procedures of other composers (as for instance the curious Monteverdian declamatory passage of Sylvana in the third act: "Dolce la morte. . ."). Is it necessary to add that such instrumental idiosyncrasies seem to be a handicap to the restoration of Italian melo-drama by means of lyrical and vocal tradition?

It would not be worth while to speak of Nino Cattozzo's opera *L'Alba della Rinascita*, were it not that this work was presented late in January in great state and with much noise in such an important theatre as the Scala, and also if this did not furnish the occasion to deplore the exaggerations on the billboards advertising the opera, while the work of musicians of a very different calibre goes begging. Cattozzo's ambitions are certainly not modest. Extremely modest on the contrary are his potentialities and his artistic means as a composer. He was born at Adra of Veneto in 1886, and this is by no means his first attempt; indeed, the recent melodrama is part of a cycle of no less than seven operas, destined, according to the author, to "celebrate the Mission of Roman Civilization in the History of Humanity." Of this cycle there have already been given in the past few years the *Misteri Gaudiosi* and the *Misteri Dolorosi*, in which were treated as an organic work reproductions of particular moments

in the life of the Virgin and of Jesus: the great drama of the Redeemer was reduced, not entirely without ability, to the proportions of an "imagerie d'Epinal," capable of sustaining a certain emotion here and there by its very ingenuity and humbleness of expression. Things are very different however with *L'Alba della Rinascita*, where the personages, more symbolic than real, nevertheless really crush the poor composer into the dust: Ottone III, Stefania, Gerberto d'Aurillac (Papa Silvestro II), and above all the two contrasting figures depicted in the gloomy atmosphere of the year One Thousand, the magician Neptanebus (in whom is supposed to be incarnate the spirit of the Evil One) and the Man (Cain), who is meant to be his opposite. These are inherent in the libretto: but they receive no relief or clarification in the music, which oscillates between a formless recitative and a rather awkward attempt at lyric dilettantism.

And notwithstanding the powers of the interpreters, Cattozzo's opera had only a meagre and dubious success, and was relegated without further ado to the limbo of sterile things.

The opera in three acts and five scenes of G. Francesco Malipiero, *La Favola del Figlio Cambiato*, with libretto by Luigi Pirandello, had its *Uraufführung* in Germany at the Landestheater of Braunschweig, the evening of the thirteenth of January. It was a marked success. At the end of February this success was confirmed by the public of Darmstadt. The opera will be given in Rome at the close of March, and will be considered in the forthcoming *cronaca italiana*.

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