

MALIPIERO AND PIRANDELLO AT THE OPERA

THE tremendous success of Malipiero's opera, *La Favola del Figlio Cambiato* at its Italian premiere, (Rome, Teatro Reale dell'Opera, March 24, 1934) has served to emphasize the problem of the theatre presenting modern operas. No one can any longer deny that the public is greatly affected by the atmosphere of the hall in which it listens to the music of new composers, nor that there is a great and seemingly irreparable antithesis between the style and spirit of the new music and that of the architecture and decoration of the opera-houses in Italy and elsewhere.

Although the new theatres take into account the changing technical and spiritual conditions of modern drama (at least no one would think of giving a modern play in a seventeenth century Venetian theatre) this is in no wise true where the opera is concerned. An environment in pure seventeenth-eighteenth century taste, like that of the Scala and the Teatro Reale dell'Opera (the latter was recently remodeled, but still retains the essential stylistic features of the old Teatro Costanzi) serves as background indiscriminately for operas like *Don Giovanni*, *La Gioconda*, and *Le Sette Canzoni*, of Malipiero. It would be too

optimistic to imagine that the mixed and for the most part blasé public which attends the premieres at these theatres can lay aside all its habits of thought and all the conventions of the melodramatic century suggested to them by the architecture, and enjoy in perfect serenity the new expressions of modern musical art.

There is one aspect, and so far as I am concerned it is the principal one, in the art of Pirandello, the librettist of Malipiero's last opera, which corresponds exactly to the spirit of the music. It is the atmosphere of anguish, of enigmatic characters, the state which begets at the same time magic transformations and popularistic gestures, scenes of ardent reality, the smell of southern earth. This is an essential feature in Pirandello's work and anyone familiar with Malipiero's music realizes that the same motives are predominant in his creative fancy: the affinity is reflected in language which in the case of both men often evokes rather than represents, flashing with sudden illumination, short-cutting audaciously rather than working-out patiently, always extending its slow, sinuous and nervous rhythms, strongly accented by elliptical figuration.

The Prodigal Son, besides being a libretto for music, constitutes the second "day" of the trilogy *I Giganti delle Montagna*, which Pirandello has been waiting for a long time to have presented on three successive days. This second "day" would be a play within a play, inasmuch as the "fable" is announced as a performance by the theatrical company of which the protagonist in the drama is a part. There are five scenes, in three acts. In the first, the Mother tells the "favola nuova" of her handsome young son who has been abducted and replaced by another rather ugly lad. She searches everywhere, turning to everyone for help; everyone mocks her, incredulous of her story. For the sake of peace, however, they lead her (second scene) to the hut of an old witch known for her mysterious commerce with hidden powers. Atmosphere of magic, vague allusions, unfinished phrases. The son is in the home of a distant king: it is useless to hunt for him.

In the third act—very brief, like an intermezzo—we are in the tiny café of a seaport. Picturesque characters; a Sciantosa singing a senseless song, a splenetic customer, three little street

walkers, a young deaf-mute girl, the ill tempered, moustached woman who runs the café, a hairy old man half-asleep playing a crazy piano. Then the "King's son" arrives, with a carnivalesque cortege; careening about on crooked stiltlike legs, the prey of a continual nervous convulsion, he appears on the threshold with a crown of gilded cardboard across his head and a little cloak thrown over his shoulders. Is this the son the mother seeks or is it the shade of the other?

In the last act (scenes four and five) we are in the house of the King's son, where we see (or do we really?) that young man himself. Colloquy of the ministers, with ironic undertone. The young prince is the one who expresses Pirandello's own ideas: toward the end, the dark and oppressive atmosphere grows somewhat more bright and smiling. The Pirandellian dialectic tries for the upper hand; but in the finale when the prince relinquishes the throne and goes away with his mother, the lyric impetus impassions the poetry, which is already music rather than words.

Let me say at once that the opera, lovely during the whole first act, loses dramatic pungency gradually as it approaches the end, and only in the very last pages is it bathed again in a lyrical atmosphere. The second act, full of motion and variety, and rich in color, has been handled by the composer with surprising mastery, but the entire scene of the ministers was fated to succumb to the intellectual and therefore anti-musical, posturings of the libretto. Here the composer was no longer able by a flight of fancy to escape the basic aridity and frequent infantilism of the text which brought on such strenuous objections at the first performance. The first act (and a part of the second as well) met with rather joyful acclaim; and truly, in the first act Malipiero has created a wonderful, shivering sort of commotion whereby he transported the spectators into the realm of absolute poetry.

There is but little space left to speak of the other lyrical novelties of the past season. Among the more interesting one can mention the *Dybbuk* of Lodovico Rocca, (Milano, Teatro alla Scala, May 24, 1924) whose libretto was drawn by Renato Simoni from the noted Hebrew drama of Anski. Rocca is already favorably known as the author of some symphonic and chamber music; he is a serious and cultivated musician, whose discretion at times

hinders his creative faculties. *The Dybbuk* had an excellent reception: and the critical world particularly appreciated the atmosphere created by means of the well developed choral parts. The same theatre in Milan presented the opera *Don Giovanni* of Felice Lattuada (April 19, 1934). Lattuada, whose *Le Preziose Ridicole* was given at the Metropolitan several years ago, follows the beaten path, distinguishing himself by an exuberance which sometimes attains its effect. At the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in Rome the sacred opera *Cecilia*, by Don Licinio Refice, met with marked success and at the end of the season the ballet *Madonna Purità* by the young Roman composer Annibale Bizzelli, won some favor.

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