

## ITALY'S NEW MUSIC OF THE THEATRE

DOMENICO DE PAOLI

**D**ESPITE the modern renaissance of chamber and symphonic music, and its recent interesting development in Italy, the Italian love of the theatre still prevails. Opera was born in Italy and there it flourished until the end of the last century. The vitality of Verdi's and Rossini's works is still far from exhausted, however outworn may be the more contemporary Puccini's. The theatre remains the fairest dream of the Italian musician, even of the opera's most inveterate enemies. Today we find Alfredo Casella, who has been so hostile to the eighteenth century music-drama, writing his first opera, *La Donna Serpente*. Indeed all Italian musicians are busy with the creation of a music theatre, which, though following the line of our traditions, will be quite modern.

Of course many composers still continue to write absolutely negligible music dramas based on the outmoded formulas of Puccini, Mascagni, Giordano, Leoncavallo. To their sentimental, romantic or heroic texts, the public shows indifference. But alas, it is equally apathetic to the most vital new works. It listens unconcernedly to a premiere, sometimes hisses when irritated. The Italian popular norm remains Rossini, Verdi, Puccini, or some intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana* or *Andrea Chenier*.

Our theatres seldom dare to present really interesting novelties. It needed all the determination of a Toscanini to launch Pizzetti's *Debora e Jaele* and *Fra Gherardo*. Malipiero, Casella and Castelnuovo-Tedesco are still to be revealed to Italy. Concertgoers retain a vague recollection of some title of their works and that is all. Foreign musical developments are unknown except to a score of musicians. *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *La Rossignol* conducted by Stravinsky at La Scala nearly caused a riot. Ravel's *L'Heure Espagnole* was coldly received. Even Pizzetti, respectfully heard, thanks again to Toscanini, was con-

sidered too artificial, too refined, lacking in feeling for the stage. No one knows anything about Honegger, Milhaud, Hindemith, Prokofieff.

It is therefore all the more remarkable that in this environment of indifference and hostility musicians still conscientiously devote themselves to music that makes no concession to the prevailing taste and create works none the less characteristic of our age because they are so varied in character. Each musician has his own conception of the theatre. Some believe in the music drama, in the best implication of that term. Others maintain that this form is unsuited to our time and anticipate a synthetic and rapidly moving theatre, with speech reduced to a minimum and the music almost exclusively unfolding the action. For some the only way out is comic opera modified and adapted to modern taste, even opera bouffe or extravaganza; and finally a few have fixed on a revival of the ballet.



Modern ballet has never been well received in Italy. The Ballets Russes passed muster at Rome and Milan but were generally regarded as a bizarre spectacle. Neither Malipiero's ballet nor Casella's had any success in Italy. *Le Donne di Buon Umore*, in which Tommassini so successfully combined the spirited Goldonian text with Domenico Scarlatti's music, is better known in the concert halls than in the theatre.

Recently the young composer, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, attempted a great choreographic spectacle with chorus and singers, *Bacco in Toscana*. The famous little eighteenth-century poem by Doctor Francesco Redi in honor of Bacchus and Italian wines is one of the most charming things in Italian literature. The composer has transformed it into a scenic presentation with mythological characters, Bacchus, Ariadne, the satyrs and the bacchantes mingling with the Tuscan villagers in the gardens of Boboli. Bacchus escorted by satyrs appears among Ariadne and her women. Welcomed in a bacchanal he drinks the good Tuscan wine. When night falls he disappears with Ariadne into the thickets, followed by pairs of lovers; the scene closes on the deserted garden.

Castelnuovo's best qualities appear in this work. The music is popular in inspiration although devoid of folk themes. There is a beautiful free melodic sweep and rhythmic life. A choral piece, it is composed of six great lyric masses; in structure it is simple yet skilfully balanced. Moving rapidly and without pause its pace is always lively. In conception it recalls Stravinsky's *Les Noces* although it is far less intellectual and much simpler in its folk character. It is the revival of an essentially Italian form, the intermezzi of the Renaissance.

Neither composers nor public have taken kindly to the music drama. Rather it is the dramatic synthesis, comic opera or opera bouffe which is favored by the modern musician. Pizzetti alone pursues the music drama ideal, though disregarding the eighteenth century formulas and striving to make the music the expression of the action. *Lo Straniero* is his latest work of this type to be presented. Here the drama develops more slowly and psychologically than in his previous operas. The music retains its typical loftiness and austerity. However I doubt whether Pizzetti can give us a more perfect realization of his ideals than he has in *Debora*. The relation *Fra Gherardo* shows to the music drama of Verdi indicates that the composer perhaps feels the necessity of giving his dramatic concept greater dynamic sweep. But there can be no doubt that the lyric drama has run its course; for even in Italy composers as a rule recognize the need for a radical reform of opera.



The dramatic synthesis seems best able to express the new age. It is suitable for any form, dramatic, lyric, comic, grotesque; speech is reduced to a minimum and simple and obvious action is dominated by the music. Small tableaux requiring the least development, inspired by the simplest feeling, can be executed without danger of abstractness. Or the synthesis may embrace great frescos, scenes swarming with life, as in Malipiero's most recent offering, *Il Mistero di Venezia*.

This curious work is a trilogy glorifying three moments in the history of Venice; the legend of its founding, *Le Aquile d'Aquileia*; life in the last days of its decadence, *Il Finto Arlecchino*,

and its modernity, *I Corvi di San Marco*. Except for the second part which has been successfully presented in several German cities, this work has not yet been produced. In my opinion it is Malipiero's best work. For the first time he depicts the life of a people, and he has done it supremely well.

The opening part, *Le Aquile d'Aquileia*, has three scenes. In the first the Aquileians, fleeing from the barbaric Huns, arrive on the islands of the lagoon, bringing their dead and their religious vestments; here the bishop holds the first divine services. The music though complex is always clear and vivid. It has sweep yet is restrained in structure; has breadth of line yet is subdued in color. The second scene celebrates the spring games attending the construction of the cathedral, while the third is given to the marriage with the sea. These tableaux are essentially lyric, with the music brilliantly dominating a series of episodes crowded with people. The prayer in the church before the festival and the marriage with the sea would suffice to place the composer in the first rank of the moderns. *Le Aquile d'Aquileia* is a paean to the glory of Venice.

In sharp contrast, *Il Finto Arlecchino*, the second part, is a charming comedy, concerned with a music festival of the end of the eighteenth century sponsored by a woman, a would-be poet. The text is reminiscent of Goldoni and also of the commedia dell'arte. The music shares this spirit, though the composer remains himself, achieving perfect unity of style. One prelude has Scarlattian vivacity, a second is a miniature concerto grosso of eighteen measures.

*I Corvi di San Marco*, the finale of the trilogy, shows us Venice today, contaminated by jazz bands, merchants, antique dealers and pseudo-artists. In the milling throngs there appears a masked protesting form, the dead *Serenissima Republica*. The mob slays the masker but suddenly itself disappears. A monument rises surmounted by the figure of a warrior of the heroic age. Mourners for those who died for the city appear to pray and thank the resurrected spirit of Venice. No one sings or speaks throughout. The action is sustained by the music alone. There is first a nightmare of melodies and rhythms of the heroic age horribly deformed and disguised by a sinister gaiety. This scene, a



preparation for the final one, is too long and confused. The most diverse characters are obscured in a fog of sound which eventually swallows the listener as well. But the finale, the appearance of the great figure and the mothers' prayers, is expressed in a magnificent and rewarding passage. It is reminiscent of sixteenth and seventeenth century music. There is marked stylistic and instrumental simplicity, unusual melodic breadth, clear polyphonic writing.

Here is revealed the romantic soul of Malipiero. He has achieved a flexibility of expression and clarity of balanced structure almost perfect. Yet always restless, seeking ever finer mediums, he has already written a work of an entirely different nature. The *Torneo Notturmo*, still unperformed, is again in the manner of the *Sette Canzoni*, a style he had apparently abandoned long since.



Among today's composers there is a definite revival of the comic opera, even bouffe. Casella's *Donna Serpente*, after the fable of Carlo Gozzi, is modeled on the old forms. I cannot discuss it in detail, as I have seen only the libretto, from which however it is obvious that it is opera comique, or perhaps better, heroi-comique. The setting is fantastic, with lyric, bouffe and grotesque elements. In the guise of a serious lyric drama, it is apparently intended to caricature the eighteenth century opera. Ignoring his previous lyric and tragic dramas, Franco Alfano has written a sentimental opera comique, *L'Ultimo Lord*. The time is today, the text a Christmas story, the setting modern English, the characters quite contemporary. The scene opens on an automobile and on a duchess absorbed in puzzles. It closes on the principal character singing the praises of the boyish bob. Putting all this to music Alfano has somehow managed to escape banality. A musical *parlando* is employed that lies between melodic recitative and natural speech, linking the lyrical passages and creating a musical fabric of great fluidity and vivacity. The simplicity of the means of expression emphasizes the truly Italian nature of Alfano's work. It is not difficult to trace this comic opera *à la garçonne* to the ancient opera of the eighth

century, although the model has been completely adapted to the modern age. The characters are clearly delineated musically, better than in Alfano's previous work. Each has a well-defined aspect; there is the vivacity of Freddie's modern young girl, the somewhat naive goodness of her parents; the sentimentality of the prince, the coarseness of the duke who seems to have stepped out of some old English painting, the malicious gaiety of Freddie's "girl friends," and the loyalty of the old steward. A rich gallery of musical portraits.

Castelnuovo has also attempted a *commedia-musicale* based on Macchiavelli's *Mandragola*. The choice of subject is not a happy one; his love of Tuscany has betrayed the composer. Practically nothing happens for two acts. The dialogue gives us a clear idea of the characters but the events all take place off stage. Reading this work and observing its wealth of ideas one finds it splendid; hearing it one finds too little contrast. A few lyric passages are all that stand the test of performance.

There are still the works of the young men, notably *La Scuola della Mogli* (after Molière's comedy) by Virgilio Mortari. He has had a checkered career. First a futurist, then a casual student at the Milan Conservatory, he later took counsel from Malipiero and lessons from Pizzetti and Casella. He has a rich fantasy, imagination and spontaneity combined with youthful spirits. In this comic opera his lyric scenes, enhanced by humor, are linked by melodic recitative, sometimes by quite rapid quasi parlando. Nothing is forced. The music flows freely, avoiding repetition and over-eloquence. Having chosen to write for the theatre he does not quarrel with his medium, but tries to master it and create a workmanlike job. Of the work of A. Veretti, the composer of the *Sinfonia Italiana* heard at Venice and Liège I regret that I am ignorant. He has written a modern opera inspired by the forms of Alessandro Scarlatti. Nino Rota Rinaldi is at work on *Principe Porcaro*, after one of Anderson's tales.

Though the number of such works in Italy today is not imposing, the quality makes claim to distinction. What is most striking is that in an atmosphere of indifference and reaction musicians not only pursue their new goals with such faith and enthusiasm, but succeed in producing works so varied and of such high order.