

OPERA IN AMERICA TODAY

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THE wide and growing popularity of opera in America today is hailed in many quarters as a new and portentous phenomenon. Flourishing opera ventures of secondary and even smaller communities, successful touring companies, the augmented seasons of the Metropolitan and other established organizations, are cited as evidence of fresh interest and boundless possibilities in the lyric theatre.

Old-timers, and those who know their American music history, view the current trend rather as a renaissance. For almost every development of today they can point to an equivalent in the past. To them it appears merely that America has climbed out of the depression and is again spending money on luxuries, of which music and especially operatic music has always been a favorite.

As is usually the case, the truth lies in a combination of both these views. Renaissance, as the term was once strictly applied in Europe, is probably as apt a description as can be found. For although little actually is being done which has not been done before, the spirit and approach have altered.

Opera has been the outstanding and at times almost sole musical taste of Americans, even of the most cultivated, for almost as long as we have had a musical history. Touring companies attracted large houses when orchestras were precariously supported by a handful of devotees. Theodore Thomas is generally regarded as the pioneer who helped establish our orchestras. Yet in the 'eighties he also conducted the American Opera Company and its successor, the National Opera Company, which toured the nation and gave elaborate productions of opera in English. Later Emma Juch reorganized this group and it lasted until 1891.

Comparing quite favorably with many of our companies today were those of Clara Louise Kellogg, Emma Abbott, the Savage English Grand Opera, the companies of Scotti, Chaliapin, Aborn, and many others. And certainly the Metropolitan, which celebrates its Diamond Anniversary this

winter, can point to many earlier years as bright or brighter than the one just past. The season is now extended to twenty weeks, but in the Gatti-Casazza era it lasted twenty-four. The sold-out houses of last year were paralleled in many previous ones when tickets were even more expensive. And to add an actual gloomy present note, now when there seems to be a new demand for opera, the Chicago company, which had functioned as one of our most enterprising ventures for thirty years, is forced to abandon production for this season.

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Where then is actual evidence of a renaissance?

It is undoubtedly in the attitude of the people who listen to it. From colonial times we have had opera with us. Except in the dark days of the depression, opera has always been well attended when available. But it has – until now – been subsidized almost entirely by private wealth. Although they drew large audiences, the tours made by the various earlier companies were financial failures. With the exception of a short period in Gatti-Casazza's regime, the Metropolitan box-holders have been forced to meet a deficit every season. Now it has been argued that we shall never have a successful American opera until we have national subsidies like those of Europe. This would require the use of public funds, and so far Congress has not been prepared to take such action. But when, during the depression, the box-holders of the Metropolitan no longer undertook to meet the deficit a desperate appeal was made to the public direct. Probably no one was more surprised at the result than the management itself. From all over the country more than a million dollars was contributed. Here was clear evidence that opera had won the support of the people themselves, a development that may well lead to the creation of a national opera which will in time be supported by the people's government.

What has brought about this change is largely the radio. The radio, together with the recording industry, created the popularity of the symphony orchestra. Broadcasts made symphonic music familiar and prepared potential audiences all over the country for good local orchestras as well as for the tours of the major organizations. Opera-on-the-air has progressed more slowly, because of production difficulties, and also because opera is a theatrical as well as musical form. Yet it was the radio audience which chiefly came to the aid of the Metropolitan. The Saturday afternoon opera broadcasts are going into their eleventh year now, and for the past three they have had one of the largest air audiences.

Radio has done more than this for opera. It has specially commissioned and presented the premieres of operas. The first such was Gian Carlo-Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*, broadcast in April 1939. In November of that year the Columbia Workshop broadcast Vittorio Giannini's *Blennerhasset*. In 1942 the League of Composers and C.B.S. jointly sponsored the American chamber opera, *Solomon and Balkis*, by Randall Thompson. Last month the N.B.C. presented the premiere of Italo Montemezzi's radio opera, *L'Incantesimo*.

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It is wrong to assume that American composers have not been encouraged to write operas in the past. During Gatti-Casazza's twenty-seven years at the Metropolitan he mounted eighteen works by Americans. That none of them was long lived must be charged chiefly to the flaws in the operas themselves, rather than lack of opportunity. But it is again, the enveloping attitude which explains this maladjustment – the attitude of the public, and of the composers and librettists as well. Everyone was in too great awe of European models and prestige, or, on the other hand, the composers and author sometimes forgot the fundamental requirements of opera in an effort to go all-out as Americans. The almost universal fear of being sentimental, which afflicted society after the First World War, also affected opera to its great disadvantage, since opera by its very nature makes its appeal to emotion. The psychological and intellectual approach is always more difficult in music. While opera was held in some disrepute as a ridiculous and out-moded medium by many intellectuals, the general public persisted in its enjoyment of Verdi, Puccini and Wagner. Each American premiere was accepted mildly and without malice, but also without enthusiasm. These new works, lavishly mounted and cast with the utmost care, were relegated, each in turn, to the limbo of good intentions.

The new native opera movement seems to have received its strongest impetus from the schools. The opera departments of the Juilliard, the Curtis Institute, Eastman, of Columbia and Yale Universities, Peabody Conservatory, the Julius Hart School and many others have been experimenting for a decade. Though opera on a grand scale, as has been pointed out, had been given in English long before, American composers now had intimate theatres to write for, young singers eager and able to meet the needs for adequate rehearsals, and a form of subsidy from the foundations guaranteeing performance.

Other agents contributing to the renaissance have been special groups of artistic, civic or educational character. The League of Composers some years ago began to commission composers to write chamber opera. Last year, in conjunction with the Columbia Theatre Associates, it offered Ernst Bacon's *Tree on the Plains*. In 1939, in association with the American Lyric Theatre it presented *The Devil and Daniel Webster* by Douglas Moore and Stephen Vincent Benet. Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball* was first produced in 1937 at the Curtis Institute; soon it found its way to the Metropolitan and remained there for two seasons. Earlier in 1937, Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, originally commissioned by the WPA, was presented by Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre. Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* was introduced in 1934 in Hartford, Connecticut, by "The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music." Both *The Cradle* and *Four Saints* had a long Broadway run. And of course there is Gershwin's so-called folk-opera, *Porgy and Bess*, which the Theatre Guild launched on its perennial travels back in 1935.

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The renaissance in opera however is most strikingly visible in the success of old and new touring ensembles that are now a colorful feature of the American musical scene. Because of war travel difficulties, the companies of today are generally smaller than those of the past, and more compact too. In general they aim to please the new and relatively inexperienced opera-goer. Purists may object to added horseplay in many of these productions. On the other hand compensating restrictions imposed by severe budgeting of expense prevents these companies from running aground as many of their ancestors did.

The Metropolitan also goes visiting again, at least a part of it does. Its stars make temporary appearances with the San Francisco and St. Louis companies. In Dayton, Trenton, Hudson County, Union City, Newark, Hartford, Cincinnati and several other cities, still more groups have mounted opera, and with profit. The Philadelphia Opera and the Philadelphia La Scala have extended their seasons and now schedule longer itineraries. Salvatore Baccaloni's company has toured successfully for four years. The Nine O'Clock *Marriage of Figaro* company continues its happy round and Charles I. Wagner is sending out two companies this season. And finally there is always the San Carlo, which takes to the road each year with unquenchable vigor.

The renaissance lies not in the number of these companies, or in the

scale of their operations, but rather in their new patronage. At last opera is a financial success. Managers now realize that people will attend opera when it is offered; the radio has created a new audience. Perhaps this audience is no larger in proportion to the population than it was many years ago. But after the Caruso era at the Metropolitan, opera lost a large part of its public. That is when the symphony orchestra rose in popular esteem, due largely to the radio. Now again it is the radio, abetted by educational and civic enterprises of all kinds, which is rebuilding the opera public.

We may be laying the foundation of operatic culture here as many people believe; or we may have to wait for national subsidy to achieve that goal. But the first requisite remains a large public demand for opera. The demand is growing, and the music world is meeting that demand. And if among composers we can find men "of the theatre," and among writers men not too aloof to give us a libretto of emotional appeal, we will have the pre-requisites of American opera. The audience for such music is already waiting for it.