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OPERA NIGHTS



ERNEST NEWMAN

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By

ERNEST NEWMAN

PUTNAM

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
OVERTURE - - - - -	3
TURANDOT - - - <i>Puccini</i> - - -	13
GIANNI SCHICCHI - - - <i>do.</i> - - -	39
THE BARBER OF BAGDAD - <i>Cornelius</i> - - -	53
THAÏS - - - <i>Massenet</i> - - -	77
EUGEN ONEGIN - - - <i>Tchaikovski</i> - - -	98
PRINCE IGOR - - - <i>Borodin</i> - - -	114
THE GOLDEN COCKEREL - - <i>Rimsky-Korsakov</i> - - -	130
ELEKTRA - - - <i>Strauss (Richard)</i> - - -	146
ORFEO ED EURIDICE - - - <i>Gluck</i> - - -	162
LAKMÉ - - - <i>Delibes</i> - - -	175
LES HUGUENOTS - - - <i>Meyerbeer</i> - - -	195
COSÌ FAN TUTTE - - - <i>Mozart</i> - - -	237
THE SERAGLIO - - - <i>do.</i> - - -	261
LES TROYENS - - - <i>Berlioz</i> - - -	283
DON PASQUALE - - - <i>Donizetti</i> - - -	325
LA JUIVE - - - <i>Halévy</i> - - -	345
MANON - - - <i>Massenet</i> - - -	367
FALSTAFF - - - <i>Verdi</i> - - -	390
LOUISE - - - <i>Charpentier</i> - - -	409
PELLÉAS AND MÉLISANDE - <i>Debussy</i> - - -	431
THE BARTERED BRIDE - - - <i>Smetana</i> - - -	452
DIE FLEDERMAUS - - - <i>Strauss (Johann)</i> - - -	470

							PAGE
ROMEO AND JULIET	-	-	<i>Gounod</i>	-	-	-	497
DER ROSENKAVALIER	-	-	<i>Strauss (Richard)</i>	-	-	-	508
CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA	-	-	<i>Mascagni</i>	-	-	-	541
I PAGLIACCI - -	-	-	<i>Leoncavallo</i>	-	-	-	549
WOZZECK - -	-	-	<i>Berg</i>	-	-	-	559
L'HEURE ESPAGNOLE	-	-	<i>Ravel</i>	-	-	-	582
BORIS GODOUNOV	-	-	<i>Moussorgsky</i>	-	-	-	596

ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Boris Godounov</i>	-	-	Chaliapine in title-rôle	<i>Frontispiece</i>
<i>Turandot</i>	-	-	Jeritza in title-rôle	page 38
<i>Gianni Schicchi</i>	-	-	De Luca in title-rôle	39
<i>The Barber of Bagdad</i>	-	-	Paul Bender in title-rôle	76
<i>Thaïs</i>	-	-	Marjorie Lawrence in title-rôle	77
<i>Prince Igor</i>	-	-	Chaliapine as Khan Kontchak	120
<i>Le Coq d'Or</i>	-	-	Lily Pons as The Queen	138
<i>Elektra</i>	-	-	Rose Pauly in title-rôle	148
<i>Orfeo ed Euridice</i>	-	-	Kerstin Thorborg as Orfeo	174
<i>Lakmé</i>	-	-	Tetrazzini in title-rôle	175
<i>Così fan Tutte</i>	-	-	John Brownlee as Don Alfonso	260
<i>Il Seraglio</i>	-	-	Robert Radford as Osmin	261
<i>Don Pasquale</i>	-	-	Baccaloni in title-rôle	344
<i>La Juive</i>	-	-	Caruso as Eleazar	345
<i>Manon Lescaut</i>	-	-	Fanny Heldy in title-rôle	382
<i>Falstaff</i>	-	-	Lawrence Tibbett in title-rôle	408
<i>Louise</i>	-	-	Grace Moore in title-rôle	409
<i>Louise</i>	-	-	Ezio Pinza as The Father	430
<i>Pelléas and Mélisande</i>	-	-	Maggie Teyte as Mélisande	431
<i>The Bartered Bride</i>	-	-	Norman Cordon as Kezal	466
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	-	-	Fernand Anseu as Romeo	500
<i>Rosenkavalier</i>	-	-	Tiana Lemnitz as Octavian	510
<i>Rosenkavalier</i>	-	-	Lotte Lehmann as The Marschallin	534
<i>Rosenkavalier</i>	-	-	Richard Mayr as Baron Ochs	535

OPERA NIGHTS

OVERTURE

Although a point of aesthetic is now and then touched upon in the following pages, I wish it to be understood at once that this is not a book of "musical criticism". Its object is severely practical—to help the listener to opera, whether in the theatre or by radio, to get more value out of his listening.

We are assured by the armchair aestheticians that a work of art ought to be its own sufficient explanation, and no doubt, in an ideal world, it would be. But we have the misfortune to live in a world constructed on anything but ideal principles; and the number of large-scale dramatic works that "explain themselves" beyond question in mere performance is smaller than we are inclined to think. Take, by way of simple illustration, the dialogue between Lorenzo and Jessica at the commencement of the fifth act of *The Merchant of Venice*. Will it be contended that these lines yield the same suggestiveness, the same beauty, to the man—supposing there to be such a man—who has never heard of Troilus and Cressida and Dido and Medea as they do to the man in whom the merest mention of these names at once floods the imagination with memories of emotions kindled in him by other great poems and dramas? Is there not something of Cervantes in us each time we listen to the *Don Quixote* of Strauss, something—however little—of Goethe present with us when we listen to *Faust* or *Mignon* in the opera house? Could we, if we tried, listen to Cornelius's Abul Hassan Ali Ebn Bekar without seeing him enveloped in the aura of that immortal ancestor of his whom we know from the pages of *The Thousand and One Nights*?

Most people know, from their own opera-going or concert-going, how large a part previous experiences of this kind play in the sum total of their pleasure in such works as those I have mentioned. By inference, therefore, they must be missing, in the case of many a work for their insight into which they are dependent wholly on what they see and hear on the stage, a good deal of rather vital stuff which the librettist and the composer intended

them to see and hear. This stuff was in the librettist and the composer when they conceived and executed the opera: without it their work would never have been just what it is: surely, then, it is necessary that it should be in us also when we see and listen, if our own imaginative apprehension of the work is to be as definite and as intense as theirs. Once more it is no use mumbling that "the work of art ought to explain itself". Notoriously it does not, in a thousand cases that could be cited. It can be asserted dogmatically that very few modern operas founded on a pre-existent novel, poem or play really explain themselves. In general, so much of the original has had to be omitted in the shaping of the libretto, so much inserted in the stead of what was omitted, so many episodes transposed in time or place, that the situations, the characters and the psychological states of the opera sometimes bear only a superficial resemblance to the work of art on which it was based.

"Quite so", it may be replied to this; "but does that alter the fact that the opera and the drama (or novel) in question are two completely different organisms, inhabiting each a world of its own, living each according to the laws of its own being? Should not the opera organism be complete in itself, self-consistent, self-sufficing? And is it not sufficient for us to listen to the opera just as it is and take it for just what it is, not troubling our heads as to its nearness to, or remoteness from, the drama or novel from which its subject was derived?" The answer to that would be, and could only be, precisely the one the questioner expects—but for one little fact which cannot be left out of consideration. No matter how much or how little of Anatole France's *Thaïs*, let us say, or of Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, or of Gozzi's *Turandot* there may be in Massenet's *Thaïs* or *Manon* or in Puccini's *Turandot*, it still remains true that France's novel and Prévost's story and Gozzi's play were functioning in every brain cell of the opera poets and composers when they were fashioning *their* works. The infiltration of the original must have affected their own treatment of the subject in a thousand subtle ways. It is surely not superfluous, then, on the part of us listeners to go over again, in imagination, the ground they traversed so often before they reached their own goal.

If an opera invariably explained itself in performance there would be little need, of course, for books of the type of the present one. But operas, alas, are often far from explaining themselves, as we soon discover when we come to discuss this or that work with some one who has pursued it enthusiastically from theatre to theatre year after year but without ever having taken the trouble to read anything about it. People of this kind often have the quaintest ideas about a work which, they will assure us, they "adore". It was not until a valued friend of mine, who had seen Wagner's tetralogy each summer for several years, read at long last a "Story of the *Ring*" that she discovered that it was not merely an accident of the dressing room that the singer of Wotan had one eye obscured by a lock of his hair. She knew nothing of the legend that in days gone by Wotan had sacrificed one of his eyes to win Fricka's love, and that the seemingly truant lock of hair was intended to conceal the loss. My friend admitted that she had been struck by the frequency with which Wotan seemed to have a wisp of hair hanging down over one of his eyes; but so far as she had ever thought about it at all she had vaguely assumed that the god was perhaps a little careless in the matter of his coiffure, and no doubt she wondered why Fricka had not spoken to him about it.

It is not only with regard to episodes and motives that the plain opera-goer requires occasional guidance. There are many things also in connection with the music which he ought to know, but which he has little or no chance of getting to know merely by sitting in his seat and looking and listening. Probably a million people have heard *Der Rosenkavalier* since 1911. Of that million, how many, I wonder, have paid any particular attention to the little figure quoted as No. 2a in the following analysis? I do not mean when motive No. 2 is first heard as a whole in the orchestral prelude to the opera—no one can fail to be aware of it there—but some forty or fifty bars later, when it appears, in the condensed form of no more than just these three notes, as a counterpart to another theme. And even if the listener's attention does happen to have been caught by this fragment, how is he to know that Strauss has marked it "seufzend", thereby telling the student of the score in the plainest terms possible that he is expected to hear

in it the sigh of the Princess over the love that she is soon to lose for ever? If I am told by the armchair aesthete that Strauss has no right to do such a thing, for by doing it he has violated the primary law that "the work of art must be its own explanation", my only reply is the humble one that Strauss *has* done it, openly, unblushingly. The "seufzend" must have had considerable significance for him, or he would not have inserted it in his score. It must surely, therefore, be of the same significance for us listeners. No clarinetist can possibly make these three notes sound unmistakably like a sigh; indeed, precisely the same three notes coming elsewhere in this or any other work might "mean" something quite different. It is simply that these three notes in this particular place were accompanied in Strauss's mind by a vision of the Princess sighing her wounded heart out; and I submit that if it is with that vision in his mind that the composer of the work listens to the passage, it is with the same vision at the back of our minds that *we* should listen to it. The question of aesthetic propriety or impropriety is here of minor importance: all that matters is the fact, and the inference to be drawn from the fact.

But these are not the only respects in which it is desirable, indeed necessary, for us to listen to an opera with our memories and our imagination co-operating with our eyes and ears. For opera, alas, through no fault of its own, is rich in disappointments and disillusionments for both eye and ear. Every musician can recall orchestral performances by the dozen in the concert room that came as near perfection as mortal man can achieve. But I doubt whether any human being has ever heard a single perfect performance of a single opera. Nature is so stupid: she has the most unfortunate gift for placing the right voice in the wrong body, or the wrong larynx underneath the right brains. No theatrical manager would dream of casting an actor of the build of a Carnera to play Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, or a stout young woman with a high-pitched, piping voice to play Cassandra or Medea. But the casting of the opera producer is a desperate matter in which he has little choice. The main determining factor is the kind of voice with which nature has endowed—if endowed is the correct word in some instances—this singer or that. So long as the actor whom the producer has in mind for Shakespeare's Ham-

let or Romeo is reasonably young, reasonably cultured and of a reasonably good figure, it does not make the slightest difference whether his voice is a baritone or a tenor, or whether its timbre is that of the clarinet or the oboe. But should an opera composer have made *his* Hamlet or Romeo a tenor, a particular singer might be ninety-nine per cent qualified for the part and yet be inexorably barred from it by the fact that nature has made him a bass. Singers of the most romantic appearance and irresistible romantic charm, who, had they been born tenors, would have made ideal Tristans or Belmontes or Des Grieux, have had to spend their theatrical lives grunting and spluttering in the depths of the Rhine as Alberichs or chalking a slate as Beckmessers, merely because nature has seen fit to pitch their vocal compass a fifth too low. We get a young woman fresh from the conservatoire whose monstrous bulk suggests to the spectator only what Ysaye used to call the *Vénus de kilo*. She looks like an ox; she moves like a cart horse; she stands like a haystack; she thinks, if she can be said to think at all, like a child whose mental development has been arrested at the age of twelve. Yet because nature has seen fit to give her a vocal organ of exceptional lightness, liquidity and capacity for coloratura, she is cast, as a matter of course, for some such flower-light, gem-bright creature as Lakmé, Violetta or Rosina.

Furthermore, even when the singer happens to be an artist of the first quality and his appearance is not too violently at variance with the character he is supposed to be representing, the most precious virtues of his voice may constitute an obstacle to his realising that character. Caruso was intelligent enough to see that the one vocal method, however perfect in itself, will not do for every dramatic part, and he knew that the timbre of the voice is to some extent the reflection of the mood of the moment. He knew that the surest way to make *Otello* *sound* different from *Romeo* was for the singer to *think* differently in each capacity; and he himself has told us that when he was due to sing one of the lighter tenor parts, such as Nemorino in *L'Elisir d'amore*, he would isolate himself, during the day, from everything that might have tended to make his spirit unduly serious in the evening. Yet even Caruso—or shall we say most of all Caruso?—could no more escape from the consequences of his own superb voice than he

could have jumped over his own shadow. Take, as an illustration, his singing of "Ah! fuyez, douce image", (of which quite a good gramophone record exists). As singing, nothing could be more magnificent, more thrilling. But is this the Des Grieux of either Prévost or Massenet? Assuredly not! The tones, and the mentality at the back of the tones, are those not of the delicately-bred young French aristocrat that is Des Grieux but of the burly Italian man of the people that was Caruso. The latter's Des Grieux was necessarily no more like the real Des Grieux than Chaliapine's Pelléas, had Chaliapine been a tenor of the same calibre as Chaliapine's bass, would have been like the Pelléas of Maeterlinck and Debussy.

We are faced with the saddening paradox that first-rate singing, considered merely as singing, may sometimes be the worst possible kind of singing in a given part at a given moment of that part. This was the gist of Wagner's grievance against Albert Niemann, the Tannhäuser of the Paris production of 1861. There was a time, Wagner told him in effect, for a tenor to deploy the full splendour of his voice and a time when to do so would merely be to achieve dramatic nonsense. Niemann, being a Heldentenor, could think of nothing during the story of Tannhäuser's Pilgrimage but the effect he, Albert Niemann, wanted to make on the audience. He constantly turned the full resources of his powerful organ on to the part, whereas Wagner's conception of Tannhäuser at this stage of the opera was of a man exhausted by physical suffering and spiritually broken by remorse and despair. It was flat nonsense, he hinted to the tenor, to suppose that such a man would be expressing himself, after the hardships of his journey from Rome, with the vigour of tone, the brilliance of colour that would be appropriate to a character in the heyday of happy youth. But Wagner, of course, might as well have argued with a rhinoceros as with a vain young bumpkin of the Niemann type.

Not that the composers themselves are wholly free from blame for certain misfortunes that attend their works. Brooding over his characters in the quiet of his chamber, a composer is sometimes apt to lose touch with the realities of the theatre. Not many of them make so bad a mistake as Debussy, whose Pelléas proved to have been conceived, in great part, in terms not of any practicable male voice but of Debussy's own voice, which was a little

of everything and all of nothing. But instances abound of composers forgetting, in their enthusiastic absorption in their work, some of the most elementary practical considerations. Several famous operas need, for their ideal performance, a double or even a triple casting of one of the leading parts. *Carmen*, for example, demands one type of tenor in the first act and another in the fourth; while in proportion as a Tristan can do all that Wagner demands of him in the terrific third act he is likely to be incapable of the delicacies of tone required of him in the greater part of the second. Nor is it only in a comparatively simple matter of this kind that the best composers, and those with the widest practical experience of the theatre, miscalculate grievously at times. Wagner was so enchanted with the preliminary rehearsals for the first *Tristan* production in the small Munich Residenz Theatre that he begged King Ludwig to allow the performances to take place there. One of the reasons for his enthusiasm was the fact that in this small place every subtlety of facial expression on the part of the actors was seizable by the spectators. Another reason was that in the sectional rehearsals every finest thread of the orchestral texture stood out clearly. But as the rehearsals developed and the whole weight of the huge machine gradually came into operation it became evident that the little theatre was over-resonant for such a score; and Wagner himself had sorrowfully to request that the performance should be given in the large Court Theatre, where something indeed was gained, but much on which he had set his heart was inevitably lost.

Sheridan is thought to have gone to the outermost edge of extravaganza when he made the proud author of the tragedy of *The Spanish Armada* expound to Mr. Dangle and Mr. Sneer the infinitude of meanings in Lord Burleigh's nod; but the musical dramatist is constantly making demands on his audience's capacity for seeing into the back of the beyond of things that would have staggered Mr. Puff. Take, for instance, the case of the still living composer, the story of which I had straight from the mouth of the singer concerned in the affair. At the rehearsals of the opera this singer found himself at one point alone on the stage for several minutes, during which nothing whatever happened except that the orchestra abandoned itself to an orgy of "symphonic

development." The singer, being an intelligent and conscientious man, and yearning to do all he could not merely for himself but for the work, one day asked the composer if he could suggest any "business" for him during this long musical standstill: alternatively, could he see his way to cutting out, or at any rate cutting down, the lengthy orchestral outpouring that was creating the difficulty? The composer was horrified at the suggestion. "It is impossible", he said, "to sacrifice a single bar of that music; it describes what is going on in the mind of So-and-So, *who comes on in the next act.*"

Here, if anywhere, was a case for thought-reading on the part of the audience! But even more experienced musical dramatists than the one of whom I have been speaking can be equally unreasonable in their demands on our gift of second sight when they come up against a snag in the construction of their work which there is no shifting and no getting round. In the last act of the *Götterdämmerung*, for instance, Siegfried lies dead on his bier. Surely now, the spectator says sadly to himself, there is nothing to prevent Hagen taking the Ring from his finger. What checks the villain in his wicked course? The dead man raises his hand, thus, so to speak, putting the fear of God in Hagen! Wagner's bland shirking of his problem at this point reminds us of the way of the Scotch parson with his congregation: "Here, my brethren, we come to a very deefficult passage, and having looked it bowldly in the face we will pass on."

In the Wagner case there is nothing for us to do but to put our standards of dramatic propriety in our pocket and pass on. In certain other less desperate cases we are given a little help "on the side" by the composer, who, all too worriedly aware that he has left a couple of important threads untied, makes a shame-faced attempt in a note in the text or the score to supply what ought to be, but assuredly is not, manifest in the stage action itself. I would cite, by way of illustration, the episode of the entry of the Princess in the last act of *Der Rosenkavalier*, a full discussion of which will be found in our analysis of that opera. Ask an ordinary theatre-goer who has never seen the score or read the libretto how it comes about that this exceedingly aristocratic lady happens to turn up in the very dubious hostelry to which Ochs has taken

Mariandel, and he will confess his utter inability to tell you. For such knowledge as we have of the matter we are dependent upon a stage direction that has apparently been slipped in, *faute de mieux*, at the last moment. Even when we happen to be aware of this direction we are more than likely to miss, at a performance, the very thing Strauss wants us to notice—the approving look the Baron turns on his Body-servant; for it is not to either of these, but to the Princess, that the eyes of the whole house are irresistibly drawn at her entrance. Furthermore, even if the spectator does chance to intercept the exchange of looks between the Baron and the Body-servant, how can he be expected to read into them the precise significance that Strauss and Hofmannsthal intended them to carry? The librettist and the composer really seem at this point to be doing in all seriousness what Sheridan did only in gay burlesque.

I have said enough, I hope, to make the reader ask himself whether listening to opera is quite as simple a matter as he may have supposed it to be. Most people would maintain that while symphonies and so on require analytic exposition in order to render them fully accessible to the plain musical man, operas explain themselves by means of their words and their stage action. I make bold to say that precisely the reverse of this proposition is true. A good fugue, a good symphony, really explains itself, because, in the homogeneous medium in which he has been working, there has been nothing to prevent the composer from saying just what he set out to say; whereas in opera there are so many factors in operation that the chances are vastly against the perfect fusion of them all. I venture to repeat that listening to opera calls for the incessant reinforcement of eye and ear by memory, reflection and imagination. The primary object of the present volume is to stimulate these faculties in the listener in respect of the operas here treated, and so assist him to keener and more delighted listening.

I have not been able to use as many musical examples as I should have liked in the case of certain copyright works. The war having made it impossible to get into touch with foreign publishers, I have had to content myself with the limited amount of quotation sanctioned by international copyright law. I have to

thank Messrs Boosey and Hawkes and the Universal Edition (London) for their kind acquiescence in the citations I have made from *Wozzeck* and from certain Russian operas.

Perhaps I ought to explain the principle—on the surface it may look like complete lack of principle—on which I have dealt with the titles of certain works. It may seem inconsistent to render the title into English in the case, say, of *Der Barbier von Bagdad* but not in the case of *Der Rosenkavalier*. My practice has been to refer to an opera by the title it receives in ordinary English or American usage. Both musicians and the man in the street speak of *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*, not of *The Troubadour* and *The Lost-and-lapsed Lady* (or something of that sort). Were we to speak of *The Troubadour*, some people might think we were referring to Mackenzie's opera of that name. For titles such as *La Traviata*, *Der Freischütz*, and *L'Heure espagnole* no satisfactory English equivalent can be found, which is one of the reasons why these works are always referred to among us by their original titles. If I were to tell a man I was going to Covent Garden or the Metropolitan to see *They All Do It* he would look at me in blank amazement: I should have to translate it back into *Costi fan tutte* before he would understand. Even people without any knowledge of German speak of *Die Fledermaus*, not of *The Bat*. Difficulties of this kind multiply when we come to operas in what may be called the remoter languages, such as Russian or Czech. How many people would recognise *The Bartered Bride* in *Prodána Nevěsta*? And if we cannot call Smetana's opera by its native name, why call it, in a book intended for English and American readers, by its German one of *Die verkaufte Braut*?

It is considerations of this last order, again, that have made me omit the words from the musical illustrations in the case of three or four of the operas here discussed. To quote the Czech in the case of *The Bartered Bride*, or the Russian in the case of such a work as *Prince Igor*, would be useless, while no published English versions exist of most works of this sort. If I have made an exception in the case of *Boris Godounov*, it is because it is more than probable that if the reader possesses a score of this at all it will be the one with the English words of Mrs. Newmarch.