

Chapters of Opera

Recollections and Records of a Quarter Century.

CHAPTER VII.

WAGNERIAN HIGH TIDE AT THE METROPOLITAN—ITALIAN LOW WATER—RISING OF THE OPPOSITION.

Copyright, 1908, by H. E. Krehbiel. In this chapter I purpose to tell the story of a period of three years, from 1887 to 1890, and in order to cover the ground I shall leave out what appertains to the repetition of works incorporated in the repertory of the Metropolitan Opera House during the preceding three seasons.

The period was an eventful one and marked the highwater of achievement and also of popularity of the German regime, but also the beginning of the disaffection of the boxholders, which resulted two years later in a return to the Italian form. It witnessed the introduction of the "Ring of the Nibelung" in its integrity and illustrated in a surprising manner the superior attractiveness of Wagner's dramas to the rest of the operatic list. Out of the Nibelung dramas it brought two absolute novelties to the knowledge of the public and revived several old operas of large historical and artistic significance, which had either never been heard at all in New York, or heard so long ago that all memory of them had faded from the public mind. It saw the height of the Wagnerian craze completely at the Academy of Music, and after a year of darkness it beheld the dawn of Italian rivalry in what had become the home of German art.

Twenty operas were brought forward in the first three years of the German regime. They were "Tannhäuser," "Fidelio," "Les Huguenots," "Der Freischütz," "William Tell," "Lohengrin," "Das Rheingold," "Die Walküre," "Die Meistersinger," "Rigoletto," "La Juive," "Die Walküre," "Carmen," "The Queen of Sheba," "Die Meistersinger," "Rienzi," "Aida," "Das Götterdämmerung," "Tristan und Isolde" and "Merlin." (In this list I have set down the titles in the language in which they live in the popular mouth in order to avoid what might seem an affectation were I to use the German form always in the story simply because the Italian and French works were sung in German.) Additions to the list in the season of 1887-88 were "Siegfried," "Der Trompeter von Säckingen," "Euryanthe," "Ferdinand Cortez" and "Götterdämmerung"; in the season of 1888-89, "L'Africaine," "Das Rheingold" and "Il Trovatore"; in 1889-90, "Die Holländer," "Die Walküre," "Die Meistersinger," "Norma" and "Der Barbier von Bagdad."

The record of the last two years indicated a falling off in energy, but though it caused dissatisfaction at the time, it seems notable enough compared with the activities of the establishment twenty years later under much more favorable circumstances. For the last of the German form during the season of 1887-88 were "Siegfried," "Der Trompeter von Säckingen," "Euryanthe," "Ferdinand Cortez" and "Götterdämmerung"; in the season of 1888-89, "L'Africaine," "Das Rheingold" and "Il Trovatore"; in 1889-90, "Die Holländer," "Die Walküre," "Die Meistersinger," "Norma" and "Der Barbier von Bagdad."

a dragon and a bird, a sublimely solemn peripatetic god who asks riddles and laughs once, and two dwarfs, repulsive of mind and hideous of body. These are the drawbacks concerning which there can be no controversy. To them are to be added the difficulties which result from a desire to embody in a serious drama mechanical devices of a kind that custom associates only with children's pantomimes and idle spectacles. A bear is brought in to frighten a dwarf; a dragon sings, vomits forth steam from its cavernous jaws, fights and slays; a bird comes endowed with the gift of language; through a miraculous process which takes place in one of the people of the play. Surely these are grounds on which "Siegfried" might be stoutly criticized from the conventional as well as a universal point of view; but I have not enumerated them for the purpose of disparaging Wagner's opera, but rather to show the intellectual and aesthetic attitude of the patrons of the Metropolitan Opera twenty years ago, who, through all these defects, saw in "Siegfried" a strangely beautiful and impressive creation, which, under trying circumstances, challenged their plaudits at the outset and soon won their enthusiastic admiration.

More direct and emphatic was the appreciation of "Götterdämmerung," the last of the season's novelties, as "Siegfried" was the first. It was produced on January 25, 1888, only three weeks before the close of the season, yet it was given six times in the subscription performances and once outside the subscription, with the financial results already mentioned. The cast was as follows: Siegfried, Albert Niemann; Gunther, Adolf Robinson; Hagen, Emil Fischer; Alberich, Rudolph von Milde; Brünnhilde, Lilli Lehmann; Gutrune, Auguste Seidl-Kraus; Woglinde, Sophie Traubmann; Willgunde, Marianne Brandt; Flosshilde, Louise Meisinger. Mr. Seidl conducted. It was but natural that the concluding drama of the tetralogy should have excited warmer sympathy than its immediate predecessor. In it the human element becomes really active for the first time. This circumstance Mr. Seidl accentuated by two bold decisions. One of the things for which Wagner has been faulted is that in his treatment of the Siegfried legend he has sacrificed historical elements in order to bring it into closer relationship with Norse mythology; has, in fact, made the fate of the gods and goddesses of our ancestors the chief concern of the prologue and succeeding dramas. Except for the hero who prior to the only ethical symbols in the character there is some force in the objection. Like

at the Metropolitan. It may have been a benignant fate which preserved "Euryanthe" from representation in the interval. The work is one which it is impossible for a serious music lover to approach without affection, but appreciation of all its beauties is conditioned upon the acceptance of theories touching the purpose, construction and representation of the lyric drama which did not obtain vally in America until the German artists at the Metropolitan had completed their missionary labors. Indeed, there are aspects of the case in which Weber's opera, with all its affluence of melody and all its potency of romantic and chivalric expression, is yet further removed from popular appreciation than the dramas of Wagner. In these there is so much orchestral pomp, so much external splendor, so much scenic embellishment, so much that is attractive to both eye and ear, that delight in them may exist independently of a recognition of their deeper values. "Euryanthe" still comes before us with modest consciousness of grievous dramatic defects and pleading for consideration and pardon even while demanding with proper dignity recognition of the soundness and beauty of the principles that underlie its score, and its tender, self-sacrifice, zeal and intensity of its expression of passion. When it was first brought forward in Vienna in October, 1823, Castelli observed that it was come fifty years before its time. He spoke with a voice of prophecy. It was not until the fifty years had expired that "Euryanthe" really came into its rights, and it was the light reflected upon it by the works of Weber's great successor at Dresden that disclosed to what those rights consisted. After that the critical voices of the world agreed in pronouncing "Euryanthe" to be the starting point of Wagner, and, as the latter's works grew in appreciation, "Euryanthe" shone with ever growing radiance. No opera was ever prepared at the Metropolitan with more patience, self-sacrifice, zeal and affection than this, and the spontaneous, hearty, sincere approbation to which the audience gave expression must have been as sweet incense to Mr. Seidl and the forces that he directed. But "Euryanthe" is a twin sister of misfortune to "Fidelio"; the public will not take it to its heart. It disappeared from the Metropolitan list with the end of the season which witnessed its revival. A dozen or more circumstances combined to give the first performance of Spontini's "Ferdinand Cortez" which took place on January 6, 1888, a unique sort of interest. In one respect it was a good deal like trying to resuscitate a mummy, for whatever of interest historical criticism found in the opera, a simple hearing of the music was suf-

Heiner in his "Hilad," Wagner has a celestial as well as a terrestrial plot in his "Ring of the Nibelung," and the men and women, or semi-divine creatures, in it are but the unconscious agents of the good and evil powers typified in the gods and goddesses.

The criticism, however, is weaker here than in Germany, where ten or a dozen dramas (chief of which is Geibel's "Brünnhilde"), as well as the medieval epics, have accustomed the people to think of their national hero with something like historical surroundings. In these writings the death of Siegfried is brought about by his alliance with the Burgundians, whose seat was at Worms; and the Gunther of the legend is being identified with King Gundlach, who was overcome by Attila and died A. D. 456. Wagner's original draft of "Götterdämmerung" (an independent drama which he called "Siegfried's Death") followed the accepted lines, and it was not until the tetralogy was planned that the mythological elements from the Eddas were drawn into the scheme, the theatre of the play changed, the time pushed back into prehistoric times and the death of the hero made to bring about the destruction of the old gods—the Ragnarök of the Icelandic tales. The connection between the death of Siegfried and the fate of the gods is set forth in the two scenes which were eliminated at this production of "Götterdämmerung." The first is the prologue in which the Nornir (the Fates of Northern mythology), the gods and the world's destiny, tell of the signs which presage the Twilight of the Gods. The second is the interview between Brünnhilde and Waltraute, one of the Valkyries, who comes to urge her sister to avert the doom which threatens the gods by restoring the baneful ring to the Rhine daughters. Both scenes are highly significant in the plan of the tragedy as a whole, but a public largely unfamiliar with German and unacquainted with Wagner's philosophical purposes can much more easily spare than endure them. In later years they were restored at the Metropolitan performances, but I make no doubt that Mr. Seidl's wise abbreviation had much to do with the unparalleled success of the drama in its first season. Persons familiar with the German tongue and the tetralogy, either from study of the book and music or from attendance on performances in Germany, were justified in being disappointed at the loss of two scenes highly important from a dramatic point of view and profoundly beautiful from a musical; but it was better to achieve success from the representations by adapting the drama to the capacity of the public than to sacrifice it bodily on the altar of integrity.

Nestor's opera, "Der Trompeter von Säckingen," which had for nearly five years fairly devastated the German opera houses, receiving more performances than any three operas in the current lists, won only a success d'estime. It was performed for the first time on November 23, dressed most sumptuously and effectively cast (Robinson as Werner, Elmblad as Conradin, Kemnitz as the Major-domo, Sänger as the Baron, Frau Seidl-Kraus as Marie, von Milde as Graf von Widenstein and Meisinger as Gräfin), but it reached only seven performances, was fourth from the bottom in the list arranged according to popularity, and in the following year it was not included in the repertory. In 1889-90 it was revived and received four performances, but its rank was seventeenth in a list of nineteen. Weber's "Euryanthe" fared but little better. It received four performances, and it was but one remove in advance of "Der Trompeter." To all intents and purposes it was new to the American stage when it was produced on December 23, 1887, with Lehmann, Brandt, Alvary, Fischer and Elmblad in the parts of Euryanthe, Egplantine, Adolar, Lydiar and the King, respectively. Mr. Seidl conducted. Twenty-four years before there had been some representations of the opera under the direction of Carl Anschütz in Wallack's Theatre, at Broadway and Broome street, but of this fact the patrons of the Metropolitan Opera House had no memory. It was a beautiful act of devotion on the part of Herr Anschütz and his German singers to produce "Euryanthe" at that time, and had it been possible to break down the barriers of fashion and reach the heart of the public, the history of the lyric theatre in America during the quarter of a century which followed would, no doubt, read differently than it does. 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