Chapters of Opera

Recollections and Records of a Quarter Century.

CHAPTER XI.

AN UPRISING IN FAVOR OF GERMAN OPERA—THE FIRST MANHATTAN OPERA HOUSE—WALTER DAMROSCH AS MANAGER—COLONEL MAPLESON FOR THE LAST TIME—MME. MELBA ESSAYS WAGNER.

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In marshalling, in the preceding chapter, the chief incidents of the period with which I am now concerned I set down the restoration of German performances at the Metropolitan Opera House as the most significant. There was a strong influence within the company working to that end in the person of M. Jean de Reszke, who, though the organization was not adapted to such a purpose, nevertheless strove energetically to bring about a representation of "Tristan und Isolde" in the supplementary spring season of 1895. Through him "Die Meistersinger" in an Italian garb had been incorporated into the repertory, and he was more than eager not only that it and the popular operas "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin" should recover their original estate as German works, but that he might gratify a noble ambition and demonstrate how the tragic style of "Tristan" could be consorted with artistic singing. He achieved that purpose in the season of 1895-'96, and set an example that will long be memorable in the annals of the Wagnerian drama in America. But the force which compelled the reform was an external one. It came from the public. To the people, as they spoke through the box office, Abbey, Schoeffel & Grau were always readier to give an ear than the stockholders or the self-constituted champions of Italian opera in the public press.

There had been talk of a rival German institution when Mr. Abbey restored the Italian régime in 1891; but it was wisely discouraged by the more astute friends of the German art, who felt that the influence of seven years would bear fruit in time, and who placed the principles of that art above the language in which they were made manifest. The interregnum following the fire had led Mr. Oscar Hammerstein to enter the field as an impresario on a more ambitious scale than ordinary, and on January 24, 1893, he opened a Manhattan opera house with a representation in English of Moszkowski's "Boabdil." The "season" lasted only two weeks, and the opera house has long since been forgotten. It stood in the same street as the present Manhattan Opera House, and its site is part of that covered by Macy's gigantic mercantile establishment. Though he had no opposition, Mr. Hammerstein showed little of that pluck and persistence which have distinguished him during the two seasons in which he has conducted a rival establishment to the Metropolitan Opera House. After two weeks, within which he produced "Boabdil," "Fidelio" and some light-waisted spectacular things, he turned his theatre over to Koster & Bial, who ran it as a vaudeville house until the end of its short career. There were English performances of the customary loose-jointed kind in the summer at the Grand Opera House, the first series of which, which began in May, 1893, derived some dignity from the fact that it was under the management of Mr. Stanton, who had conducted the Metropolitan Opera House for the stockholders during the German seasons; and in November the Duff Opera Company anticipated Mr. Abbey's forces by bringing out Gounod's "Philemon et Baucis" in an English version.

Then things, however, contained no portents for the future of opera in New York; they were the familiar phenomena which flit by in the metropolis's dead seasons. Pregnant incidents came in the midst of the regular season. It chanced that Mme. Materna, Anton Schott, Emil Fischer and Conrad Behrens, who had been identified with the earlier German seasons, were in New York in February, 1894, and taking advantage of that fact Mr. Walter Damrosch arranged two performances of "Die Walküre," in the Carnegie Music Hall, for the benefit of local charities. They were slipshod affairs, with makeshift scenery and a stage not at all adapted for theatrical performances; but the public rose at them, as the phrase goes, and Mr. Damrosch felt emboldened to give a representation of "Götterdämmerung," with the same principals at the Metropolitan Opera House, on March 28. Again there was an extraordinary exhibition of popular interest which the German Press Club turned to good account by improvising a performance of "Tannhäuser" for its annual benefit on April 9. Soon there was a great stir in the German camp, but united action was hindered by the rivalry between Mr. Damrosch and Mr. Seidl. The supplementary season at the Metropolitan ended on April 27, and under date of April 28 there appeared a circular letter, signed individually by friends of Mr. Seidl, soliciting subscriptions for a season of German opera in 1904-'05. The plan contemplated forty performances between November and May, on dates which were not to conflict with the regular performances of Italian and French opera. At the same time announcement was made of the organization of a Wagner Society, whose purpose it was to support a season of Wagner's operas at the Metropolitan Opera House, beginning on November 19, 1894, and continuing for four weeks—twelve evening performances and four matinees, the company to include "the greatest Wagnerian singers from Bayreuth and other German opera houses." Personal friends of the two conductors attempted to unite the rival enterprises, and a conference was held at the office of William Steinway. The attempt failed because Messrs. Seidl and Damrosch could not agree on a division of the artistic labors and credits. Mr. Seidl withdrew from the negotiations. In less than a week Mr. Damrosch announced that he had secured subscriptions for his season amounting to $12,000, and also a guarantee against loss of $10,000 more. On May 10 he sailed for Europe to engage his company. When he returned in the fall he announced a season of twelve evenings and four afternoon performances, to be devoted wholly to Wagner's operas and dramas, to begin on February 25, 1895. The prices ranged from $4 for orchestra stalls to $1 for seats in the gallery. In his company were Rosa Sucher, Johanna Gadski, Elsa Kutscherra, Marie Brema, Max Alvary, Nicolaus Rothmühl, Paul Lange, Franz Schwarz and Rudolph Oberhauser, besides Emil Fischer and Conrad Behrens, who had been identified with the earlier German régime. Adolf Baumann, of the Royal Opera at Prague, was engaged as stage manager, but lost his life in the wreck of the North German Lloyd steamship Elbe on the voyage hitherward.

The season began, as advertised, on February 25 and ended on March 23, the sixteen performances receiving an additional representation to enable Max Alvary to effect his 100th performance of Siegfried in the drama of that name in the city where he "created" it, as the French say. There was also an additional performance of "Lohengrin" and three extra performances at reduced prices after the subscription. The whole affair was Mr. Damrosch's own venture, he being at once manager, artistic director and conductor, but, as I have intimated, he had the backing of an organization called the Wagner Society, which was chiefly composed of women. The season came hard on the heels of the Italian and French season. Mr. Damrosch's leading singers were familiar with Wagner's works, but practically he had to build up his institution from the foundation and to do it within an incredibly short time. With such rapid work we are familiar in America, but in Germany to have suggested such an undertaking as the organization of a company, the preparation of a theatre and the mounting, rehearsing and performing of seven of the most difficult and cumbersome works in the repertory of the lyric drama within the space of five or six weeks would have been to have invited an inquest de lunatico. I do not wish to be understood as mentioning these things wholly in the way of praise—the results from an artistic point of view disclosed much too often that they were blameworthy—but what credit they reflect upon the tremendous energy, enterprise and will power of Mr. Damrosch must be given ungrudgingly and enthusiastically. Plainly he was inspired with a strength of conviction quite out of the ordinary line of that spirit of theatrical speculation upon which we have so often depended for the large undertakings in music. It was a belief based on something like religious zeal, and under the circumstances what he did was an even more remarkable feat than that accomplished by his father in 1884. I sometimes thought at the time that he was driven into the enterprise more by impulse than by reason, and the fact that he occasionally had the same sort of a notion is evidenced by a letter which I received from him in response to one of mine to him near the close of the season. "Thanks for your congratulations on the financial success so far," wrote the young manager. "I shall breathe more freely after the next four weeks are over. The responsibility has been a heavy one, and it is curious that no one seemed to share my almost fatalistic belief in Wagner opera. Neither Abbey & Grau, nor Seidl, nor any one was willing to touch it, and I was finally driven into it myself by an irresistible impulse which, so far, seems to have led me right. I am glad now, for many reasons, that events have so shaped themselves, and I think that the season will be productive of much good for the future. A curious and interesting fact in connection with the performances has been that the public came to hear the operas, and not the singers."

And such a success! Not only far in advance of what the fondest Wagnerites had dared to hope for as a tribute to their master's art, but one which compelled them to rub their eyes in amazement and grope and stare in a search for causes. Twenty-one times in succession was the vast audience room crowded, and when the time was come for striking the balance on the subscription season there was talk, only a little fantastic if at all, of receipts aggregating $150,000, or nearly $9,000 a performance. I should like to keep the thought of this unparalelled financial success separate from that of the artistic results attained. Between the financial and artistic achievements there was a wide disparity; but that fact only sufficed to emphasize the obvious lesson of the season, namely, the vast desire which the people of New York felt again to enjoy Wagner's dramas. Fortunately I can make a record of the capaciousness of that hunger without necessarily lauding its intelligence and discrimination. Great indeed must have been the hunger which could not be perverted by the vast deal of slipshod work in the scenic department of the representations, and the vaster deal of bungling and makeshift in the stage management. Many an affront was given to the taste and intelligence of the audiences, and dreadful was the choral cacophony which filled some of the evenings. Yet the people came, they came, as Mr. Damrosch observed in his letter, to hear the dramas instead of the singers, and though "Lohengrin" had been beautifully performed in the Italian season by artists like Nordica, Jean and Edouard de Reszke and Maurel in the cast, the public crowded into the German representation as if expecting a special revelation from Fräulein Gadski, a novice, and Herr Rothmühl, a second rate tenor. Of all the singers only Miss Marie Brema, a newcomer, and the veteran Emil Fischer were entirely satisfactory. For the beautiful dramatic art of Frau Sucher and for her loveliness of person and pose there was much hearty admiration, but this could not close the ears of her listeners to the fact that her voice had lost its freshness. The subscription repertory, including the Alvary anniversary, was as follows: "Tristan und Isolde," three times; "Siegfried," four times; "Lohengrin," twice; "Götterdämmerung," twice; "Tannhäuser," twice; "Die Walküre," twice, and "Die Meistersinger," twice. In a letter recently received from Mr. Damrosch he says: "My first spring season of thirteen weeks in New York, Chicago, Boston and a few Western cities gave a profit of about $53,000, leaving me with a large stock of Vienna-made scenery, costumes and properties."

Mr. Damrosch had won the first battle of his campaign and taught a lesson of lasting value to his old and experienced rivals. Warned by the success of his experiment and stimulated by a petition signed by about two thousand persons asking that German representations under Mr. Seidl be included in the Metropolitan scheme, Messrs. Abbey, Schoeffel & Grau made German opera a factor in the next season; but they did so in a half-hearted way, which defeated its purposes and brought punishment instead of reward. Nevertheless German opera had returned to the Metropolitan to stay, and henceforth will call for attention along with the Italian and French performances in this history. Meanwhile, since I have begun it, let me finish the tale of the impresarioship of Mr. Damrosch.

Flushed with victory, the young manager prepared a five months' campaign for the year 1896, and sought for new worlds to conquer. Philadelphia, in which city he began operations on February 20, treated him shabbily, but he did fairly well in New York and other cities in the East and West. Unfortunately for him, he made an invasion of the South, which was not ripe for serious opera, either financially or artistically. A performance in one city of that section which cost him over $3,000 brought him exactly $220. The difference between the sums was what Mr. Damrosch paid to learn that knowledge and love of Wagner's operas had not penetrated far into Tennessee.

Experience is always purchased at large cost in the operatic field. Abbey, Schoeffel & Grau refused Mr. Damrosch the use of the Metropolitan Opera House for his second New York season, and he was driven to the old, socially discredited Academy of Music. They did not look with favoring eyes upon an enterprise which had achieved so tremendous a triumph at its very start, and they provided a large percentage of the wormwood which filled the cup which Mr. Damrosch drank in 1896; but they embittered their own goblet by the procedure, and when the time came for laying out the campaign of 1896-'97 they were quite as ready as Mr. Damrosch to sign a treaty of peace whose provisions promised to make for the good of both sides instead of the injury of either. The rivals agreed to keep out of each other's way as much as possible and even to help each other by an occasional exchange of singers. By this means it was purposed to widen the repertories of both companies, Mr. Damrosch providing the Metropolitan establishment with a Brünnhilde and an Isolde for Jean de Reszke's Siegmund, Siegfried and Tristan, and the Metropolitan company lending him in return Melba, Eames and Calvé, or others, to enable him to perform some of the Italian and French operas which he had included in his list. Mr. Damrosch yielded Chicago to his rivals and took Philadelphia in exchange. It was a wise compromise. Mr. Damrosch lost $40,000 in 1896; he made $14,000 in 1897. The next year, the Metropolitan Opera House being closed during the regular subscription period, as will appear later in this record, Mr. Damrosch entered into partnership with Charles A. Ellis, manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who had undertaken the management also of Mme. Melba's American affairs, and Italian and French operas were added to the German repertory. The regular season showed a good profit, most of which, however, was frittered away in a spring tour made by Melba with a portion of the company. By this time Mr. Damrosch had concluded that he was too good a man and musician to surrender himself to the hateful business of managing a travelling opera company, and he withdrew from the partnership with Ellis, to whom he sold all his theatrical properties, and returned to concert work and composition, though for two weeks in the next season he was conductor of Mr. Ellis's company.

And now to some of the details of the artistic work of these Damroschian enterprises. The year 1896 was signalized by the appearance in America of two singers who rapidly achieved first class importance. These were Katherina Klafsky and Milka Ternina. Mme. Klafsky was the wife of Herr Lohse, whom Mr. Damrosch also engaged as assistant conductor. She came here under a cloud, so far as the managerial ethics of Germany were concerned. How much respect those ethics were entitled to may be judged from the story. I have already said, in discussing the case of Mme. Lehmann and her violation of contract with the opera at Berlin, that a speedy result of the success of German opera under Mr. Stanton was a change of attitude on the part of the Intendanten of German theatres toward the New York institution so soon as it was found that a handsome proportion of the American earnings might be diverted into the pockets of those Intendanten or the managers of municipal theatres. When Mr. Damrosch engaged his second company Mme. Klafsky was a member of the Municipal Theatre in Hamburg, of which Pollini was director. When the offer of an American engagement came to her she consulted with Herr Pollini, who graciously gave his consent to her acceptance of it on condition that she pay him one-half of her earnings. She refused to agree to do this, and, fearing that Pollini would invoke the aid of the courts to restrain her from coming to New York, she took French leave of Germany more than two months before she was needed here. Her success in America was emphatic, and after she had effected a reconciliation with Pollini she was re-engaged by Mr. Damrosch to alternate with Mme. Lehmann in the season of 1896-'97. Within a fortnight of the re-engagement she died in Hamburg from a trephining operation undertaken to relieve her from the results of an injury to her skull, received while in America.

Mme. Klafsky and Mr. Alvary had sung in "Tristan und Isolde," with which Mr. Damrosch began his campaign in Philadelphia on February 20. Her success was instantaneous, and her tremendous dramatic forcefulness, the natural expression of an exuberant temperament, placed her higher in public favor during the season than Mme. Ternina, whose refined and ingratiating art did not receive full appreciation till later. Other members of the Damrosch troupe of 1896 were Wilhelm Grüning, tenor, and Demeter Popovici, bass, besides Gadski, Fischer, Alvary and other persons already known, but of smaller importance. The New York season began at the Academy of Music on March 2 and ended on March 28. The operas were "Fidelio," "Lohengrin," "Siegfried," "Tannhäuser," "Die Meistersinger," "Die Walküre," "Der Freischütz" and (in the original English) Mr. Damrosch's "The Scarlet Letter." This opera had its first performance in New York on March 6. Its libretto was written by George Parsons Lathrop, a son-in-law of Hawthorne, who wrote the romance on which it was based. The cast included Johanna Gadski as Hester Prynne, Barron Berthald as Arthur Dimmesdale, Conrad Behrens as Governor Bellingham, Gerhard Stehmann as the Rev. John Wilson, and William Mertens as Roger Chillingworth. The greater part of the music had been performed at concerts of the Oratorio Society on January 4 and 5, 1895. The book of the opera proved to be undramatic in the extreme, a defect which was emphasized by the execrable pronunciation of nearly all the singers at the performance on the stage at the Academy. In the music Mr. Damrosch essayed the style of Wagner, and did it so well, indeed, as to deserve hearty admiration. He was helped, it is true, by factors frankly and copiously copied from the pages of his great model. The nixies of the Rhine peeped out of the sun flecked coverts in the forest around

MILKA TERNINA. (Copyright by Aimé Dupont.) LOLA BEETH. FRANCES SAVILLE. (Copyright by Aimé Dupont.)

JOHANNA GADSKI. (Copyright by Aimé Dupont.) M. CASTELMARY. MARIE BREMA. (Copyright by Aimé Dupont.)

Hester Prynne's hut, as if they had become dryads for her sake; ever and anon the sinister Hunding was heard muttering in the ear of Chillingworth, and Hester wore the badge of her shame on the robes of Elsa, washed in innocency. But such things are venial in a first work. In frankly confessing his model (for it cannot be thought for a moment that Mr. Damrosch expected his imitations to be overlooked) he illustrated a rule which applies to all composers at the outset of their careers. The fact must be noted, but it is much more to the purpose that the young composer blended the elements of his composition with a freedom and daring quite astonishing in its exhibitions of mastery. There is no sign of doubt or timorousness anywhere in the work, though the moments are not infrequent when the utterance is more fluent than significant. The typical phrases which he chose to symbolize the persons and passions of the play are most of them deficient in plasticity, and nearly all of them lack that expressiveness which Wagner knew so well how to impress upon his melodic elements; the greater, therefore, was the surprise that Mr. Damrosch was able to weave them together in a fabric which moved steadily forward for more than an hour, and reflected more or less truthfully and vividly the feeling of the dramatic situations. Unfortunately there is little variety in this feeling, so that in spite of Mr. Damrosch's effort, or, perhaps, because of it, there is a deal of monotony in the music of the first act. There is a fine ingenuity of orchestration throughout, however, and an amount of daring in harmonization which sometimes oversteps the limits of discretion. In an agonizing scene between Chillingworth and Hester at the close of the first act the orchestra and the two chief personages are wholly engrossed with an exposition of the dramatic feeling of the moment, while the chorus (supposed to be worshipping in the neighboring meeting house) sing the "Old Hundredth" in unison and without instrumental support. It is an admirable historical touch, and the device is the approved one of using the psalm tune as a cantus firmus to the remainder of the music; but Mr. Damrosch's harmonization of the ensemble is such that we seem to hear two distinct and unsympathetic keys. There was, after the second act, a scene upon the stage in honor of Mr. Damrosch, in which, after several large wreaths had been bestowed upon him, a representative of the Wagner Society came forward, and on behalf of that body presented him with a handsome copy of Hawthorne's story and the incorrect statement that the honor was paid to him as the first American who had composed a grand opera on an American theme which had been publicly produced. In this there were as many errors of statement as in the famous French Academician's description of a lobster. George F. Bristow's "Rip Van Winkle" was composed by a native American and was brought out at Niblo's Garden long before Mr. Damrosch was born in Breslau; while Mr. Maretzek, a foreign born American, like Mr. Damrosch, brought out under his own direction and with continued success an opera entitled "La Spia," based on Cooper's novel. This merely in the interest of the verities of history.

The German season of 1907, a part of whose story I have already told, began at the Metropolitan Opera House on March 8 and lasted four weeks. It added no novelty to the local list, but had some interesting features, among them a serial performance of the dramas of Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung," the first appearance of Mme. Nordica in the Brünnhilde of "Siegfried" on March 24 and the joint appearance of Mmes. Lehmann and Nordica in "Lohengrin," the German singer, true to her dramatic instincts, choosing the part of Ortrud. On April 1 Xaver Scharwenka, who had taken a residence with his brother Philip in New York, borrowed the company from Mr. Damrosch and on his own responsibility gave a performance of his opera, entitled "Mataswintha." The opera was produced under difficulties. It had withstood its baptism of fire in Weimar seven months before, and Mr. Scharwenka had performed portions of it at a concert for the purpose of introducing himself to the people of New York. But the singers had to learn their parts from the beginning, there was a great deal of pageantry which had to be supplied from the stock furniture of the Metropolitan stage, the tenor Ernst Kraus took ill and caused a postponement, and even thus the chapter of accidents was not exhausted. When the performance finally took place Herr Stehmann, a barytone, had to sing Herr Kraus's part, which he had learned in two days. Under the circumstances it may be the course of wisdom to avoid an estimation of the opera's merits and defects and to record merely that it proved to be an extremely interesting work and well worth the trouble spent upon its production. Under different circumstances it might have lived the allotted time upon the stage, which, as the knowing know, is a very brief one in the majority of cases. The story of the opera was drawn from Felix Dahn's historical novel "Ein Kampf um Rom."

It is high time to get back again to the story of opera at the Metropolitan Opera House under the direction of the lessees; but before then chronological orderliness requires that attention be paid to an incident outside the category of prime importance. This was the first production in New York of Humperdinck's delightful fairy opera "Hänsel and Gretel" at Daly's Theatre on October 8, 1895. The production was in English. The venture looked promising, and great interest was felt in it. Mr. Seidl was charged with the musical direction. A company of singers was brought together, partly from London, partly enlisted here. Sir Augustus Harris, director of the opera at Covent Garden, was the financial backer of the enterprise. As numerous an orchestra as the score calls for could not be accommodated in the theatre, but Mr. Seidl did the best he could, and the band was commendable. Three of the singers, Miss Jeanne Douste, Miss Louise Meisslinger and Mr. Jacques Bars, disclosed ample abilities; but the English manager had no knowledge either of the needs of the opera or the demands of the New York public; Sir Augustus's speech on the opening night, indeed, disclosed ignorance also of the name of the composer and the history of the work which he had clothed with considerable sumptuousness. It was long remembered with amusement that to him Herr Humperdinck was "Mr. Humperdinckel" and the opera some "beautiful music composed for this occasion." And so great expectations were disappointed, and, after worrying along from October 8 to November 15, the opera was withdrawn with a record of failure, not deserved by the work and only partly deserved by the performance. We shall meet the opera again in the story of opera at the Metropolitan Opera House a decade later, when it came into its rights, and the public were able to testify their admiration in the presence of the composer.

The prospectus of Henry E. Abbey and Maurice Grau (which continued to be the official style of the managers) for the season 1895-'96, contained this announcement: "The management has also decided to add a number of celebrated German artists and to present Wagner operas in the German language, all of which operas will be given with superior singers, equal to any who have ever been heard in the German language. The orchestra will be increased. . . . The chorus will be strengthened by a number of young, fresh voices, to which will be added an extra German chorus." Signor Mancinelli was not re-engaged as conductor, but Anton Seidl was. After what I have told thus far in this chapter the causes which led to this change of policy will be readily understood. The augmented company was a formidable host, though its strength remained in the French and Italian contingent. Had the German singers been equally capable, the story of Mr. Damrosch's enterprise might have read differently. Mme. Calvé returned and revived the furor over "Carmen"; Mesdames Melba, Nordica, Scalchi, Mantelli, and Messrs. Jean and Edouard de Reszke, Pol Plançon, Victor Maurel and Castelmary remained; newcomers were Lola Beeth, Frances Saville, Marie Brema (who had been brought from Europe by Mr. Damrosch), Giuseppe Cremonini, Adolph Wallnöfer, Giuseppe Kaschmann (who had been a member of Mr. Abbey's first company twelve years before) and Mario Ancona. The regular subscription season consisted of thirteen weeks (fifty-two performances), beginning on November 18, and there was a special subscription, at the same scale of prices, for a season of ten performances of German operas, beginning on December 5. There were also performances at popular prices on Saturday evenings, and the entire season, excluding the spring season, which developed but little interest, compassed seventy-four representations. For these and thirteen Sunday night concerts the public paid about $575,000.

"Oh! how far are we from Covent Garden!" cried Jean de Reszke on the night of November 27, and he clipped in his arms the friend who had come to offer his congratulations to the thunderous plaudits of the audience. M. de Reszke was in a fine glow of enthusiasm. He had sung and played Tristan and opened a new era in the style of Wagnerian performances in New York. A few days later, while the drinking horn was going from hand to hand at a mediæval dinner given in honor of the principal interpreters of Wagner's love drama (Mme. Nordica, Miss Brema, the brothers de Reszke and Mr. Seidl), he responded to a toast, and in four languages, English, German, French and Italian, celebrated the advent of what he called "international opera." Why he neglected to throw in a few Polish phrases for the benefit of his countryman Paderewski, who sat opposite him at table, his hosts could not make out, unless it was because he wanted his expressions of delight at the achievement and prospect to be understood by all his hearers. High hopes filled the hearts of all local lovers of the lyric drama at the period. The promises of Abbey and Grau had stimulated the kindliest, heartiest, cheeriest feeling on all hands. All bickerings between the adherents of the various schools were silenced by the promulgation of a policy which seemed as generous and public spirited as it was liberal. Whenever it was practicable New York was to have performances which should respect not only the tongue, but also the spirit of the works chosen for representation. That M. de Reszke had been an active agent in the inauguration of the new regime was an open secret to his acquaintances, and he bore public testimony when he supplemented his impersonation of Tristan with a German Lohengrin. The significance of such an act, coupled by Mme. Nordica's support of him in both performances, seemed extraordinary even in the minds of those who were not inclined to attach much importance to the language used in performance, so long as the performance was imbued with a becoming spirit of sincerity and a desire to make artistic purpose replace idle diversion. It looked as if through the example of these two artists, seconded by the liberality of the management, the people of New York were to take a long step forward in musical culture—a step toward the foundation of an institution which should endure and exemplify the æsthetic, moral and physical character of the people of America.

The expectations aroused by the announcement were wofully disappointed. There were nights of wondrous brilliancy and of extraordinary splendor in nearly every department. Some of the refulgence came from the new ambitions with which M. de Reszke and Mr. Seidl inspired the organization. The season had no prouder moments than those filled with the performances of "Tristan" and "Lohengrin" vouchsafed the subscribers to the regular subscription; but it had no deeper gloom than that which settled upon the subscribers to the special German season on most of the occasions set apart for them. The fate of "Fidelio" was utterly grievous; two representations of "Tristan" filled their souls with indignation instead of gratitude; there is no saintly intercession which could have won redemption for "Tannhäuser." The performances of "Tristan" and of the Italian "Lohengrin" at which Nordica, Brema and the brothers De Reszke sang were brilliantly successful, but in each case the regular performance was made to precede that set apart for the German subscription. That circumstance would alone have sufficed to arouse suspicion that the management was at least willing to discriminate against the special Thursday nights, and the suspicion was wrought into conviction by the disparity between the performances of the two subscriptions. If it was the purpose of Abbey & Grau to put German opera on trial their method looked very unfair. "The drama for its own sake as an art work, and not for the sake of the singer" is a fundamental principle of German art, but it can only maintain its validity with the help of adequate performances. Saving the four singers who sang in Italian and French as well as German (Mme. Nordica, Miss Brema and the brothers De Reszke), the German singers of 1895-'96 were wofully inefficient, and the German season was an indubitable failure.

I shall append a list of performances of the operas presented in the seasons covered by this chapter and its predecessor, and its perusal will, I think, enforce even upon a careless reader the fact that in spite of the shortcomings to which I have called attention the administration of Abbey & Grau yet marked a gigantic step in the direction of dramatic sanity and sense over the lists which prevailed in the period when this story began. In the consulship of Mapleson the repertory might have been turned into verse quite as dramatic as most of that of the opera books. Thus:

"Favorita," "Puritani,"
"Lucia di Lammermoor,"
"Marta," "Linda di Chamounix,"
"La Traviata," "Trovatore";
"Il Barbiere di Siviglia,"
"Robert' il Diavolo,"
"Don Pasquale," "Rigoletto,"
"Faust," "Gli Ugonotti," "Un Ballo,"

and so on for quantity. Of the old hurdy-gurdy list "Favorita," "Traviata," "Trovatore," "Lucia" and "Rigoletto" were given, but unitedly they had only ten representations, and most of them were on Saturday nights, when popular prices prevailed. Even though Melba sang in "Lucia," it had to be consorted at the last with "Cavalleria," which Mme. Calvé made attractive. Against this fact we have the other that "Carmen" alone had a greater number of representations than the entire old-fashioned list, and that the operas which were most popular after it were "Tristan und Isolde," "Faust" and "Lohengrin."

Of the ten German performances three were devoted to "Tristan," two to "Tannhäuser," one to "Fidelio," two to "Lohengrin" and two to "Die Walküre." "Tristan," "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin" were in the repertory of the regular subscription season. Only two unfamiliar works were brought forward—Bizet's "Pêcheurs de Perles" (two acts only) and Massenet's "La Navarraise"; but there was an interesting revival of Boito's "Mefistofele" after a lapse of twelve years, and a more than interesting revival of "Tristan und Isolde," with Mmes. Nordica and Brema and the brothers De Reszke in the principal parts. Mme. Melba did not join the company until December 27; she added Massenet's "Manon" to her repertory. Jean de Reszke increased the list of parts in which he was known by adding Tristan to it and the German Lohengrin. Mme. Nordica's new roles were Isolde, Venus in "Tannhäuser" and Elsa in German. Miss Brema's operas were "Tristan," "Lohengrin," "Orfeo," "Aida" and "Die Walküre," and, like Mme. Nordica, Mlle. Lola Beeth and Signor Kaschmann, she sang in German as well as Italian. "La Navarraise" was brought forward for Mme. Calvé on December 11, 1895; the two acts of "Les Pêcheurs de Perles" at a matinee on January 11, 1896.

Colonel Mapleson provided a prelude to the Metropolitan season of 1896-'97 with a short season of Italian opera of the archaic sort at the Academy of Music. The doughty manager could no longer fly his old London colors, so he appeared as the sole director of "The New Imperial Opera Company." With two or three exceptions all his singers were strangers to the operagoers of New York. Mme. Scalchi was again with him, and Signor de Anna; but the rest were newcomers. Among them were Mme. Hariclée-Darclée, Mme. Bonaplata-Bau, Susan Strong and Mme. Giuseppina Huguet, sopranos; Mme. Parsi, Mlle. Ponzano and Mme. Meysenheim, contraltos; Signori de Marchi, Randacio, Betti, Olivieri and Durot, tenors; Signori Ughetto and Alberti, barytones, and Pinto, Terzi, Giordani, Borelli and Dado, basses. The conductors, capable men both of them, were Signori Bimboni and Tango. Within a fortnight "Aida," "Trovatore," "Traviata," "Les Huguenots," "Sonnambula" and "Faust" had been sung and a new work brought out. This was "Andrea Chenier," by Illica and Giordano, which had its first performance in America on November 13, 1896, the cast being as follows:

Andrea Chenier	Durot
Carlo Gerard	Ughetto
Maddalena di Coigny	Bonaplata-Bau
La Mulatta Bersi	Meysenheim
La Contessa di Coigny	Scalchi
Madelon	Parsi
Roucher	Dado
Il Romanziero	Alberti
Fouquier Tinville	Borelli
Mathieu	Borelli
Un Incredibile	Giordano
L'Abate, poeta	Giordano
Schmidt, Carceriere a san Lazzaro	Terzi
Il Maestro di Casa	Olivieri
Dumas	Pinto

Tango conducted and the performance had a rude forcefulness quite in keeping with the character of the opera. Under better conditions "Andrea Chenier" would doubtless have held its own for a respectable space in the local repertory. But the seeds of dissolution were germinating in the company even before the performances began, and Colonel Mapleson did not dare to appear long in rivalry with the Metropolitan when it opened its doors on November 16. In a week or so he went to Boston, where after one or two performances the orchestra went on strike and the Imperial Opera Company went to pieces. With it the last effort of the veteran manager. Mapleson had held out a promise of the likelihood that Giordano would come to New York to give personal superintendence to the production of his opera and carried his fiction to the extreme of telling a reporter of "The Sun" newspaper that the composer was in the city. Meeting the reporter in the Academy of Music, I expressed my doubt touching the correctness of his information, whereupon he pointed out the gentleman whom Colonel Mapleson had introduced to him as the composer. It was Giordano, the barytone! After its introduction to America "Andrea Chenier" disappeared for nearly a dozen years, when, on March 27, 1908, it had a single performance at the Manhattan Opera House, so that Mme. Eva Tetrazzini, the wife of Cleofonte Campanini, who had retired from the stage, might help at a gala representation in honor of her husband.

No season since the Metropolitan Opera House was opened was so full of vicissitudes as that of 1896-'97. First came the death of Mme. Klafsky, who, under the reciprocal arrangement between Mr. Damrosch and Abbey & Grau, was to sing the chief Wagner roles with Jean de Reszke. This happened in September, and was followed by the death of Mr. Abbey (nominally the leader of the managing directors, though from the beginning it was Mr. Grau who did the practical work of management) and of Mr. William Steinway, who had formulated and carried through the plan of reorganization which relieved the firm of Abbey, Schoeffel & Grau of its burden of indebtedness and transferred it to the shoulders of the Abbey, Schoeffel & Grau Company (Ltd.). Just before the season began Mme. Nordica, who had won her way to a high place in the favor of the public, and whose absence from the company's roster was widely and sincerely deplored, came forward with a story charging her failure to secure a re-engagement to the intrigues of Mme. Melba and M. Jean de Reszke. So far as the gentleman was concerned the story seemed improbable on its face, and long before the season was over Mme. Nordica was willing to admit publicly that she had been misinformed as to the facts in the case. It remained, however, that Mme. Melba had reserved the exclusive right to herself to sing the role of Brünnhilde in Wagner's "Siegfried." It soon turned out that the failure to secure Mme. Nordica was to cost the management dear. Mme. Melba sang the part once, and so injured her voice that she had to retire for the season and cede the rôle to Mme. Litvinne (the Mlle. Litvinof of Colonel Mapleson's company in 1885-'86), who up to that time had not succeeded in convincing the public that she was equal to so great a responsibility, although she had been engaged to sing the part of Isolde after Mme. Klafsky's death and the failure of negotiations between Mr. Grau and Mme. Nordica. The manager's judgment was never at fault in these negotiations; he wanted to secure the services of Mme. Nordica, for he well knew their value, but the unhappy contract with Melba stood in his way, and Mme. Nordica was beyond his reach when the failure of Melba's voice and her departure for France on January 23 left the company crippled. Happily the popularity which Mme. Calvé's impersonation of Marguerite in Gounod's "Faust" had found restored that perennial work to its old position as one of the principal magnets of the season. Mme. De Vere-Sapio was engaged to make possible the production of such operas as "Hamlet," "Le Nozze di Figaro" and Massenet's "Le Cid." Then there fell a double blow: Mme. Eames went into a surgeon's hands and Mozart's scintillant comedy had to be withdrawn. It was to have been given on February 10. Flotow's "Martha" was substituted for it, and in the midst of the performance the representative of Tristan, M. Castelmary, fell on the stage, fatally stricken with heart disease.

It would be pleasant to say that the facts thus detailed exhaust the story of the institution's misfortunes; but they do not. I have already told of its financial outcome. Throughout the season a determined and wicked effort was made to injure the opera, and was helped along by columns of idle speculation and gossip in three or four newspapers. Without ground so far as anybody could see the notion was given publicity that there was grave doubt that opera would be given in the following year. The talk seemed wholly gratuitous, for if there were any signs of falling off in popular interest so far as the opera was concerned or in the confidence and satisfaction of the stockholders of the Opera House Company so far as Mr. Grau's administration was concerned it escaped the notice of experienced and interested observers. The total attendance was larger than in the preceding season, and the interest displayed in the representations was fully as keen. But the newspaper gossips would have their way, and in the end turned out to be prophets, for there was no opera in 1897-'98, for reasons which will have to be discussed in the next chapter.

The season began on November 16. The regular subscription was for thirteen weeks, three nights a week and Saturday afternoons. Extra subscription performances were thirteen Saturday nights and three Wednesday afternoon representations at popular prices and an extra week—three nights and a matinee—at subscription prices. There were, therefore, in all, seventy-two performances, at which twenty-four different operas were brought forward, as shown in the table which is to follow. There was a less elaborate organization than in the preceding season, but the average merit of the performances was higher, there being no ill equipped German contingent to spoil the record. There were, however, quite as many German performances without the special singers and the extra subscription. In place of the latter, an attempt was made to give extra Wednesday matinees, but the experiment was abandoned after three weeks.

The most sensational incident of the season was the collapse of Mme. Melba after her ill advised effort to sing the music of Brünnhilde. To the loveliness of her devotion and the loftiness of her ambition honest tribute must be paid, but it must also be said that nature did not design her to be an interpreter of Wagner's tragic heroines. Her vocal and temperamental peculiarities put a bar to her singing the Brünnhilde music. It did not lie well in her voice, and she was not then, and is not now, of the heroic mould, and her experience should have taught her that her voice would not admit of the expansion necessary to fit her for that mould. That the music wearied her was painfully evident long before the end of the one scene in which Brünnhilde takes part in "Siegfried." Never did her voice have the lovely quality which had always characterized it in the music of Donizetti and Gounod. It lost in euphony in the broadly sustained and sweeeping phrases of Wagner, and the difference in power and expressiveness between its higher and lower registers was made pitifully obvious. The music, moreover, exhausted her. She plunged into her apostrophe with most self-sacrificing vigor at the beginning of the scene, and was prodigal in the use of her voice in its early moments; but when the culmination of its passion was reached in what would be called the stretto of the piece in the old nomenclature she could not respond to its increased demands. It was an anti-climax. Wagner's music is like jealousy: it makes the meat it feeds on if one be but filled with its dramatic fervor. Recall what I have related of Mme. Lehmann's statement of how she was sustained by the emotional excitement which Wagner's dramas created in her, and how it made it easier for her to sing the music of Brünnhilde than that of Norma. But Mme. Lehmann was a woman of intense emotionality, and her voice was colored for tragedy and equal to its strain. It would be a happiness to say the same of Mme. Melba, but no judicious person would dream of doing it. "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory." Mme. Melba should have been content with her own particular glory.

Massenet's "Le Cid" was the only novelty of the season. It was given on February 12, 1897, with the following distribution of parts:

Rodrigue (his original character)	Jean de Reszke
Don Diegue (his original character)	Edouard de Reszke
Le Roi	Jean Lassalle
Le Comte de Gormas (his original character)	Pol Plançon
St. Jacques, L'Envoye Maure	Jacques Bars
Don Arras	Signor Cotti
Don Alonzo	Signor de Vaschetti
L'Infante	Clementine de Vere
Chimène	Fella Litvinne