

REFLECTIONS CAUSED BY CHALAPINE'S "BASILIO."

A Few Notes on His Predecessors in This Entertaining Role—Historic Progress of Opera Buffs and the Correct Method of Performing It on the Stage.

The repetition of Rossini's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" at the Metropolitan Opera House on Monday evening was made especially interesting by the second appearance of the Russian basso Theodore Chalapine as Don Basilio. Much excited comment followed his first appearance, and there was a dissonant difference of opinion. In quarters habituated to the hearty commendation of everything done by persons of distinction in the smart set, some of whom are in concert with the establishment, it was proclaimed with more fervor than discretion that Mr. Chalapine's Basilio was a masterly achievement. Echoes from the sanctum of the intendat whispered that Mr. Corried pronounced it the greatest performance of the part ever seen. If a dog must not venture to bark after an utterance of Sir Oracle he may at any rate sometimes feel compelled to laud.

Meanwhile humble professional observers of opera who have seen very many performances of Rossini's "Barber" will continue to believe that Mr. Chalapine's impersonation, as shown last week, was incorrect in spirit, in detail, in make-up and in musical delivery; that furthermore it was a rather puerile travesty of a clever character sketch and that at times it was downright vulgar.

History has not much to say about Vitarello, who was the original of the part in Rome in 1815, except that he was an old singer of the Sistine Chapel, but it is safe to say that he sang the part in the traditional style of the time. Buffos were not at that time expected merely to alternate in delivery between a dry parlando and a marionette squeak, but were supposed to have genuine comic talent and voices with which to sing when necessary. Whatever Vitarello may have been, his first audience showed him very plainly that he was to be a buffo, not a buffon.

Entering well dressed and made up for Don Basilio, he stumbled over an accidentally open trap, fell and struck his nose so that it bled. He was compelled to sing the great "Calmia" air with a handkerchief at his nose. Some of the audience thought that the fall, the injury to the nose and the application of the handkerchief were all part of the business of the role, and regarding this as necessary, expressed their opinion as Italian audiences are wont to do even unto this day.

De Begnis, who was the original Basilio in Paris in 1815, was regarded as one of the finest comic actors and singers who ever trod the stage, and his art never required him to stoop to horseplay. When Garcia with his remarkable family produced the opera in this city in 1826 the Basilio was Angrisani, of whom not a single word has come down to us to indicate that he made a mistake of the singing teacher of Rossini.

The significant comment of the Evening Post was, "We cannot avoid expressing our wonder and delight at the powerful, low and mellow tones of Signor Angrisani's bass voice, or rather of his 'most miraculous organ,' of which we never before heard the equal."

It is quite evident that these early singers were not seeking for burlesque effects in their impersonations of Rossini's comic characters. They would have respected extravagance of Lablache as easily as they respected the modesty of the other, and it is not on record that he made of Dr. Bartolo anything but a picture of ridiculous simplicity.

Rossini studied well the art of Mozart, and though he wanted the musical genius to rise to such heights as his master, he never sank to such depths as to forget the true province of operatic characterization. Mr. Chalapine's Basilio is a burlesque of the real character. It makes people laugh, that is true, but it does not make people laugh to see Jefferson De Angelis fall down a flight of "slippery day stairs." Still Mr. De Angelis would hardly care to rest his reputation as a comic actor on that piece of stage business.

As usual in things operatic the opinions expressed in favor of such travesties as the character of Don Basilio by Chalapine are founded on pretentious ignorance. Those who approve the impersonation do so because it furnishes them some passing amusement, which is all they seek in the opera house. Those who attempt to defend it betray a liberal want of acquaintance with facts. Those who have the fortune to be are often displeased with what is. In the early days of opera buffi Mr. Chalapine's method, which has been accepted, for there was not a little buffoonery in the performances. But in an opera by Rossini this sort of acting is historically and artistically out of place, for the simple reason that Rossini, in this matter as well as in many others, made a distinct advance over his Italian predecessors.

It is the fashion in these times to decry Rossini, who was rather a man of genius, but he was an innovator, a man of invention, and of much more important contribution to the development of Italian opera than Leonardo, Mascagni, Cilea and Giocanni, all of whom are very little brothers of Pencilini and Verdi.

Let us look back for a moment into the past. The comic element in opera comes down to us from an early period when the serious opera (opera seria) was built much on the lines of the melodrama of our own time and was never without its "comic relief." The great founder of the Neapolitan school, the composer Alessandro Scarlatti, already in his time they had become so efficiently conventionalized to require at least one regular scene to themselves in each act.

In "La faduta del Decemviri" they have even two scenes in each act.

In the early operas of Scarlatti the comic characters were nearly always an old woman and a page. The old woman, sung always by a tenor, was just such a one as we meet often in our own time in "comic opera," as it is called. She is garrulous, grotesque and exceedingly anxious to be married. In later operas this character came into the hands of the operatic coutrette, the real singing comedienne.

This seems to have been the arrangement for the first time in the role of Leandrea in "L'occasione fa il fuorile" (1717). In "La faduta del Decemviri" Puccio, a servant, is not in the "Leggenda," and he has his little air, with accompaniment, which he plays on a clavichord, a two stringed instrument in a fifth. In one scene he falls asleep after singing a song in which there is a capital imitation of a yawn.

In another of Scarlatti's operas we find "patter" of the kind used so much in opera but of a far later period. Scarlatti never had more than two comic characters and their duets were made of short, snappy phrases, just such as we hear in modern comic scenes.

They were developed until their importance made them incongruous with the general progress and spirit of a serious opera. The public, however, was unwilling to part with this form of amusement, and hence the composers sought for a solution of the problem which now confronted them.

It was readily found in the already existing intermezzo. As far back as 1553 miracle plays had been interspersed with choral or chanted intermezzi. Later the intermezzo assumed a dramatic form accompanied by music and was performed between the acts of a play. At first these intermezzi, one given after each act, had no relation to one another. But in 1620 Verri, in "L'Androcco," introduced a series of intermezzi, on the subject of Apollo and Daphne, having a connected story.

The sprightly humor of the Neapolitans did much for this form of drama and music, and the intermezzo in music became an established form and accompanied nearly every opera. Thus the way was opened for the establishment of a field for the separate display of the comic element, and when Pergolesi in 1733 produced between the acts of another piece his "La Serva Padrona" he unwittingly founded the opera buffa form. For this little work went on its travels and had its brilliant successes as an individual play throughout operatic Europe. The war which it caused in Paris between the Lullists and Buffonists, when it had been produced between the acts of Lull's "Acis et Galathee," is history.

At first these intermezzi had only two characters and their plots were much like those of some later farces, but in a short time more characters were introduced and the plot from a mere skit was expanded into an intrigue. Hence we find our burlesque hero, who began by laughing from and imitating Spanish and Italian writers of comedy; that Moliere founded not a little of his method on Corneille and Beaumarchais, who wrote "The Barber of Seville" and "The Marriage of Figaro," was a lineal literary descendant of Moliere. The comedy of intrigue was the field in which all these masters exercised their splendid talents.

As the intermezzo developed into the opera buffa it acquired distinct musical form. It also gained definiteness in the treatment of voices. The bass voice was from the outset recognized as an excellent medium for humor with a well marked character, just as orchestral composers found a similar medium in the voice of the bassoon.

The old man, senile, amorous, prone to childish rage, to garrulity, to explosive utterance, his voice beyond his control and flying ludicrously from raucous bass and piping treble, suggested methods of musical treatment as philosophical in their foundation as the "stilo rappresentivo" of the founders of modern opera. Volubility of delivery allotted to a big, sonorous organ, was the first factor in the formation of a comic style for basses, and later, when Mozart introduced the barytone voice into opera, the style was extended to it, as we hear in the closing measures of Figaro's "Largo al fattorino" in "Il Barbiere." Unfortunately the patter, like all other "informally" acquired methods of musical treatment as philosophical in their foundation as the "stilo rappresentivo" of the founders of modern opera. Volubility of delivery allotted to a big, sonorous organ, was the first factor in the formation of a comic style for basses, and later, when Mozart introduced the barytone voice into opera, the style was extended to it, as we hear in the closing measures of Figaro's "Largo al fattorino" in "Il Barbiere."

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ROME'S FADED CHRISTMAS

ANCIENT CEREMONIES SHORN OF THEIR SPLENDOR.

The Music of the Pifferari No Longer Heard—Only One Representation of the Birth of Christ Remaining—The Picturesque Fish Market Standing Dark.

ROME, Dec. 10.—The Roman Christmas of to-day hardly differs from any commonplace holiday or an ordinary Sunday festa. Its old peculiar customs and celebrations have all disappeared. The church midnight functions have survived, it is true, but shorn of all their ancient splendor, deprived of many quaint ceremonies and ideas of devotion, and religious sentiment save to a few. The precept or representation of the birth of Christ may still be seen in some of the churches, but it has been almost entirely supplanted by the cinematograph. The cotto or fish market is no longer patronized on Christmas eve, as few nowadays keep the vigil and abstain from eating meat. The pifferari are silent. The Pope does not pontificate in any of the great basilicas.

The usual greetings of "Buono feste" or "Buona Pasqua" are out of fashion, or if exchanged at all they imply the giving of a tip. The festive clang of a thousand bells is no longer heard. Everything has been altered and modernized. The engravings of Pinelli and Thomas, which represent the pifferari in their picturesque costumes, conical felt hats, red waistcoats, blue jackets and small clothes of skin or yellow homespun, skin sandals bound with cords laced up to the knees and long brown boots, playing on the sampogna or bagpipe and the piffero or reed pipe before some wayside shrine of the Madonna, and the soft plaintive music of their peculiar pastoral Christmas song recalled by some old organist in one of the churches during some December festival of an old forgotten custom.

On November 25 of every year, when the first touch of the coming winter was felt, the streets were lighted in every house as well as in the back of the Papal troops and in the apostolic palaces, the pifferari arrived in Rome from the Abruzzi mountains and the sound of their rude but melodious instruments resounded through the city. Their arrival marked the advent of winter and the coming of Christmas.

The tune they played, sweet, plaintive, yet not sad, was always the same, and it was called a novena, from its being performed for nine consecutive days before the feast of the Madonna, which falls on December 8, and for another nine days before Christmas. They stopped before every shrine, at street corners, down lanes and in the courtyards of palaces, and they were generally hired to play the novena for two paoli; that is, about a lira.

They went in couples, generally father and son, but sometimes three of them could be seen together, a sure sign that one, the oldest of the party, intended to give up playing and was making his last pilgrimage to Rome in order to point out to his substitute, son or near relation, the houses of his best clients.

It is estimated that there were over 1,500 shrines in Rome and the pifferari had to sing and play the novena before each one. For early dawn until late at night they kept earnestly at their work, their hats off, their eyes fixed with devotion on the Virgin and a small admiring crowd listening to their music.

They were undoubtedly one of the most picturesque and characteristic sights of Rome, and to Rome it became the capital of Italy, most popular with Romans and foreigners alike. It is not known why this old custom, which, it is said, originated with the pilgrimage of the early Christians to Rome, was allowed to die out, but probably they were classed with strolling players and forced to pay a Government tax, which naturally proved an effective method for keeping them away. Like many other old customs the pifferari are now a relic of the past.

The main feature of Christmas in Rome is the presepio, meaning a manger, but used as a name for the representation of the nativity of Christ, which in times gone by used to be exhibited in nearly all the churches. The origin of the presepio in Italy is said to be that in the year 1223, when St. Francis of Assisi one Christmas night in the wood of Greccio, near Assisi, procured a manger which he filled with straw, and which he placed the image of the Holy Infant.

The peasants and shepherds crowded about this first rude representation of the nativity, and the custom of the presepio became general and its erection in every church formed one of the most important features of each Christmas festival.

The only presepio of importance that has survived to the present day in Rome is that of the Church of the Ara-Celi, which stands on the site of the temple of the goddess Juno, and where according to a Church tradition Augustus erected the "Ara primigenia" to commemorate the prophetic prophecy of the coming of the Saviour. One of the side chapels of this church is devoted to the nativity, which represents the birth of the Holy Child, who was born to Joseph and the Bambino, a woe-laden image carved by a Franciscan monk and painted by St. Luke, and from that time the custom of the presepio became general and its erection in every church formed one of the most important features of each Christmas festival.

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RAISER'S LIFE IN ENGLAND.

Simple Habits Velled by Etiquette and Clouds of Police.

From the Paris Mail. The park surrounding Highcliffe Castle in the well guarded. To the right, to the left in front and behind, one caught sight of strange profiles whose identity was easy to guess. The very gardeners collecting the dead leaves and raking the paths were evidently more accustomed to other occupations.

A BOOSTING COMMITTEE

Thinks Its Guitars "Neath Royal Palms and Arboreal Forests. The polite name for it is the Publicity Committee of the Manila Merchants Association, but everybody who sees it calls it the boosting committee, and almost everybody lends a hand and helps along.

The idea is to convince Americans that the Philippines are a little paradise on earth and that a fortune awaits the expenditure of a strictly limited supply of Yankee hugle and Yankee dollars.

The boosting committee issues bulletins, brief but to the point. There have been six so far, and while their paper and print are plain white and black the contents are so rosy and glowing that the committee has no doubt succeeded in winding up each statement with capital to this effect:

We represent Nothing! The Philippines Will Stand the Truth! With that announcement on the back page of the bulletin dealing with the Philippine climate it gives one a slight jolt to read on the front page:

Cooler than New York, Chicago, Washington or St. Louis. Death rate of Americans lower than in majority of cities in the United States. The paradise of the world's tropics.

These are startling statements, but the literary lights of the boosting committee back them up with the following tempting picture:

We have delicious mornings and afternoons, with a brief interval between 1 and 3 P. M. when hard physical work is oppressive and when it gets as hot as it does in the coolest parts of the United States in midsummer. Do you realize that the thermometer has never touched the 100 degree notch in the Philippines but thrice in forty-three years?

There have been a few cases of heat prostration due to alcoholism, but do you know that the first bona fide case of sunstroke is yet to be recorded by the Board of Health? Do you know that the nights are always deliciously cool, that the thermometer drops to 72 to 75 every night in the warmest season and falls to 42 to 45 degrees and lower for months during the cool season?

Would you like the fact noised abroad—we would—that there are two months here, and only those two, namely April and May, when the day heat is more prolonged, and that in ten hours and at a cost of \$20 you can be in and among the pines at Benguet warming your chilly hands over a wood fire?

Do you know that if the cost defers you in such a boat and carriage and at a cost of \$1.90 you can be in Majayay, glad to crawl under a blanket to keep warm, and in the presence of the great falls and one of the most enchanting scenic panoramas in the world?

Have you ever heard of any one building a cyclone cellar in the Philippines? You have read of our dreaded typhoons. The name sounds appalling we will admit, but it is mostly the name. The same official reports that in forty-three years we have had just two that did any serious damage.

We some months have as many as eleven earthquake shocks—don't you get shocked at that?—but these are of the most trifling kind and it is only in the papers the next day.

The seeker for an ideal climate can find it in the Philippine Islands and find it nowhere else—no bearable conditions with other tropics under the sun. We challenge Cuba, Hawaii, Singapore, Ceylon, the East West Indies to produce at sea level equally good roses, violets, mignonette or other flowers of temperate country origin as are produced here.

Swept by the refreshing breezes of the South Seas we can have all of these things and sit tinkle our guitars beneath the royal palms, the nodding fronds of arborescent ferns and the kaleidoscopic beauty of tropical orchids.

CRIPPLED IN TWO MINUTES

ENGLAND'S BATTLESHIP TEST REVEALED WEAKNESS.

Fire Control System of the Doomed Ship Here Reduced to Impotence at the Very Start—Shows New Plan of Naval Gunners—How to Be Necessary.

LONDON, Dec. 12.—The long expected gunnery experiments on the battleship Hero have formed the principal subject of discussion among naval people since the Bedford-Scott incident became stale. There is need to wonder at the great interest taken in the matter, for it is not given to many nations thus to sacrifice a valuable war vessel.

Italy certainly did not long ago fire off all the guns of an obsolete ship to see the effect, and found that the simultaneous broadside started every rivet in the vessel. The British Admiralty made the same experiment with the brand new Dreadnought and only broke a little crockery. In the Hero it has sacrificed a 6,800 ton ship which might still carry the flag without shaming it.

There was a very special reason for deciding to knock the Hero to pieces. The fact is the Admiralty has long been uneasy about the modern arrangements for gunnery control on battleships. As is pretty well known, the big guns are not fired haphazard. The discharge of each weapon is arranged by signal from a platform some hundred feet or more up on the mast. Not only is each shot thus timed but the fire control stations are fitted with an elaborate set of delicate appliances by which the exact range of the target may be obtained.

There are instruments for telling the distance of the object aimed at and for telescoping following the fall of the shot so as to correct the aim of the gunners below. There is another electrical arrangement by which the alteration in the range as the vessel moves along is automatically calculated and recorded.

Further, there are telephones and voice pipes and what not for communicating all these data from the apertures above to the men in the gun turrets below. Now, the point is, what is going to happen to all this delicate machinery when the shots begin to fire in real war?

To get information on this point was the real object of the experiment with the Hero. There has been a growing feeling among experts that in this arrangement of firing control the eggs were being put into one not very safe basket.

The feeling already existed when the Dreadnought was built, and a great point was made of giving her a fire control platform not on a single mast, but on a strong tripod. Even so, every one who has seen the Dreadnought or the Lord Nelson, which has also the tripod, must have noticed that even the three legs by no means solve the problem.

For one thing there is more to be hit. It is not a mere thing to contemplate that right at the beginning of a fight one unshakable tripod carries away the ship's gunnery experts, range finders, telescopes and all-like the cradle and baby in the nursery rhyme. Such a disaster might paralyze a vessel's gunnery if not properly provided for by duplicate apparatus, and something not on a mast.

So the Admiralty determined to fit the Hero with a full set of electrical fire control instruments, and dummies of the gunnery officers, and put the ship through the ordeal of actual bombardment to see the effect.

In the meantime expert minds are busy also with devising some alternative plan of gunnery control. It is eventually expected that the control platform will be moved by armored structures like tall conning towers, in which the gunnery instruments may be safely housed. Such a plan has already been tried on H. M. S. Jupiter.

The Admiralty is determined to keep the detailed results of the experiment secret. The special correspondent of one paper gives this description of the firing:

"The doomed ship had been moored in an east and west direction so that she presented her full broadside to the attacking ships. The battle squadron steamed past very slowly, closing up to 6,000-8,000 yards for the firing.

"The King Edward VII., flagship of Lord Charles Beresford, led, followed by the rest of the ships in pairs. The firing ships were the Hibernal and Dominion, two of the finest ships in the navy."

But the most curious thing about the experiment was that the firing ships were not in a line, but in a curve, and although sparks began to fly from the Hero as soon as the range was found the shooting was by no means up to the level of battle practice, notwithstanding that the weather conditions were absolutely perfect—a calm, clear day, with the sun behind the firing ships. Very soon the Hero was a hazy object of a dense cloud of smoke, through which now and again great tongues of fire as shell after shell struck the helpless old warrior.

"It was a very curious sight, and save for a slight list to port there was nothing to show at a distance the ordeal through which she had passed. The funnel and mast both stood, and very little smoke issued from her interior, but a closer inspection revealed the full extent of the damage.

"The upper deck had been blown up by the explosion of a heavy shell underneath it, the after conning tower had been penetrated and one of the life rafts had been blown through his chest. Altogether twenty-eight hits had been scored out of about 130 rounds.

"There was a small hole through the funnel, but most significant and important of all, a splinter of shell—no, a direct hit—had gone through the mast, and although this still stood it had severed every control wire in the mast. This was the most urgent problem of the trial solved in the first two minutes.

"Would the modern system of fire control withstand for long the attentions of a straight hitting enemy? Here was a ship fitted with the control apparatus whose maintenance is absolutely essential during battle, and here were ships which hit their target once in every four rounds, and the whole control system had been reduced to impotence in two minutes."

RAISER'S LIFE IN ENGLAND.

Simple Habits Velled by Etiquette and Clouds of Police.

From the Paris Mail. The park surrounding Highcliffe Castle in the well guarded. To the right, to the left in front and behind, one caught sight of strange profiles whose identity was easy to guess