

What the Music World Lost When Oscar Hammerstein Died



The FAMOUS TOP HAT, AND THE IMPRESARIO'S DAUGHTER STELLA

Remarkable Achievements Reflect Genuine Originality of Man Who Trusted All to His Own Genius and Found His Chief Joy in Being an Impresario

WHEN the newspaper men of London surrounded Oscar Hammerstein on the eve of the opening of the opera house he had built in the British metropolis and implored him to say with what he was going to open, the impresario from America replied:

"With debts."

A new word, a real American word ought to be coined to fit Oscar Hammerstein. He loved the word 'impresario' and rolled it constantly on his tongue, but it is too foreign to describe Hammerstein and his activities.

At the funeral the other day there were many men in tears who hadn't wept for years. These were the men who had been most closely associated with Hammerstein in the climax of his life and musical career at the Manhattan Opera House. They were men who had at times suffered from his singular personality. They appreciated the fine qualities of the man and forgot in their admiring remembrance of his genuine originality the squalls through which they had passed with him at the helm. Their tears were genuine and made a beautiful tribute to the good things, and they predominated in this strange character.

Money a Means, Not an End.

Money to Oscar Hammerstein was but a means to an end. It would be using too big a phrase to say that he was an idealist and believed in art for art's sake. His early hardships and the defects of his education kept him from that pose. He liked money because it permitted his joy in life to develop, and this joy came from being an impresario.

It is not quite certain that he really enjoyed music or in a lifetime devoted to it in a peculiar personal way that he ever understood the goddess. He made no effort to enter her kingdom by the recognized door, and he scoffed at the preliminary steps which lead to the altar. May we not say, without putting ourselves in that unpleasant class that takes a certain ghoulish pleasure in decrying the dead, that if he had educated himself in music or in the other arts and sciences he dallied with, Oscar Hammerstein would have left a greater name and would himself have been happier and wiser man?

This is a mere plea for conventionality in art; a plea for the belief that to know anatomy and perspective does no harm to the most idealistic and color drunken painter, that the study of what the world has in great architecture benefits the man who designs summer cottages.

Art has her immutable rules and the true worshipper learns them first and then departs from them.

An overweening confidence in one's self, a conceit that it is the fashion to call nowadays pathological vanity, is a marketable quality. We see what it sells for every day. But when the bargain is made the purchaser acquires wisdom. He rarely buys such a commodity again. This conceit, this vanity is the attribute that nature employs very often to get her work done. Especially when that work is something grandiose and scares the careful man who is in the habit of measuring accurately his own capabilities. Poor devil, his very care to be accurate in making the measurements often prevents him from doing any but the conventional things.

Modesty in our world is the angel of the fireside and the evil demon of the street.

The strange combination of man who has but departed from life was a genius and he took advantage of that fact by seldom or rarely preparing himself or his materials for an overwhelming success. He made a wonderful record through his belief in himself, he accomplished things he might not have attempted if the trait of foresight had been granted along with his other great endowments, but it would be fatal to say . . . fatal to all rules of probability, what he might have accomplished with this gift added.

Hammerstein was a natural genius in many directions and he had never any hesitation in making the statement.

"I am a genius," said he boldly and as if defying contradiction, "as a mechanic, as an inventor, as a chemist, and most of all as a musician."

Oddly enough, for statements like this, while they may dazzle, generally lead to laughter, what he said he demonstrated. He was a mechanical genius without knowing very much of physics. The stage hands and carpenters and mechanics used to go to him when their mechanical troubles got beyond them, and with no pains at all, without explanation of how he did it, and it may be without knowing how he did it, he straightened out their difficulties. It was the same in artistic things about which he may not have been expected to know very much; he had a remedy for tangles of this kind also and applied it without regard to precedent. The confident manner in which he went at all things half solved them, and there may have been that fine quality of "horse sense" added to his other assortment of traits.

That he didn't apply it to personal criticism was for the result the saddest part. He built him a house rather early in his career in the Mount Morris Park neighborhood where he was his own architect. This house was a mixture of majestic architectural features, incongruous for its size, and meretricious ornament which would indicate in the builder corresponding traits and tastes. It was, thought at the time, the house he wanted and it served the purpose of impressing the ignorant, but Hammerstein learned better in a very short time and decided that it was not the house he wanted. Throughout his career of builder, however, he continued to do what he liked. The result was that he has left no perfect architectural monument.

What is Conscience?

Lack of knowledge in an art, if it be but deep enough and urged by a powerful pride, is a force. That has been proved to the dismay of many devotees of art who would gladly lay down their lives at her shrine. Never, it would seem, has the dismay spread so wide as it goes to-day. The successful man achieves in making themselves remarked, opposed and accepted, who lack the qualities that the cold principles of art demand in her votaries, is very confusing to a student of art.

He sees a painting or a statue or a building gain the admiration of the world when the books all teach him that each is false in principle. In his lack of worldly wisdom he takes it for granted that a painter, a sculptor, a musician, must have an artistic conscience and that every artist fits himself by study and reflection to expose it. What the student does not define correctly is the word "con-



ARTHUR HAMMERSTEIN

science." It is the reflection in ourselves of our neighbors' opinions of us. If you don't value their opinion there need be no conscience.

Hammerstein didn't. Everything he did was done because he wanted to do it, and to do it in his own way. There is much to admire in the 'bigness' of his courage and in the way that he sacrificed money, past achievement, everything he had gained by work and thought to do something "beyond" that tempted this proud, self-confident spirit. This independence of mind saved him, in his career of builder in the midst of sordid battles with contractors and every sort of annoying commercial controversy, from going under as smaller men would have gone. Wafted forward on the strong breeze of his own judgment, which he never learned to distrust, he went from disappointment blithely to new achievement. But no man can go through such an ordeal without marks on his soul, and there isn't a doubt but that Hammerstein had them. At this period, between the building and the loss of the Olympia and the construction of the Victoria Theatre, a certain moroseness, which he tried among his friends to throw off, indicated the marks inside.

Former War Dog Becomes Fire Fighters' Mascot

WHEN the men of the gas battalion of the Seventy-seventh Division let loose their pigeon messengers during the rainy, spirit depressing days of the Argonne Forest and Meuse fighting it often happened that the birds never reached the friendly loft in the front or rear lines. The story of how the birds fell, wounded by shrapnel, is now history. But the story of the stray dogs which associated themselves with the battalions heading for the front lines, and then accredited themselves by doing the most daring of things is yet to be told. Americans who soldiered in France will never forget the stray dogs that made friends with the doughboys. Every contingent that landed at Etretat, St. Nazaire, La Pallice, Bordeaux or other port was bound to come upon one of these stray dogs inland. Like all war refugees the dogs were always hungry and they quickly realized the doughboys were friends worth having.

Over in the quarters of Engine Company No. 19, at 855 West Twenty-fifth street, there is a small undersized Dalmatian who wags his tail when one calls him "Ted." With this dog goes an interesting history of how, before the firemen came into possession of him, he lived with and did errands for the heroic man who made up the gas battalion of the Seventy-seventh Division. This mascot, a thoroughbred

French war dog, was known on the western front by all the soldiers of the division as "Phoegene." He introduced himself to Company G of the gas battalion soon after the St. Mihiel action and was befriended by Sergeant Harry J. Bailey. A few handfuls of slumgundy and corned "willsie" convinced the stranger that his associates had "beaucoup chow." One night the gas battalion found themselves up on the front lines observing German artillery fire, which had a plentiful mixture of gas shells. Some pigeons went back with messages, but an hour later the men stationed up at the front realized their messengers were falling them. Then the thought of training the dog, whom all endearedly called Phoegene, occurred. In very short time the men by dividing themselves into small groups and hiding in the dense woodland of the Argonne Forest trained the dog to carry messages from one group to another.

Time and again thereafter in actual battle Phoegene made good, tramping back and forth from rear to front lines with a message hidden under his collar, which some of the men had made for him and on which was placed a silver plate with the divisional name and company letter of the outfit to which the dog was accredited. The dog had many narrow escapes from bursting shells, but he always carried on.

He was a marvel at leaping across shell holes and trenches. The least alarm when he was at the front from the direction of the enemy was sure to be detected by the dog. He seemed

of his violin. After the parent had beaten him unmercifully with a skate strap young Oscar sold his violin for \$35, ran away to Hamburg and

crossed the ocean to America in the steerage. Here he worked in a cigar factory for \$2 a week, and when by showing his boss some improved way to cut tobacco leaves this wage was increased to \$5 weekly he married.

Now his mind was turned to inventing improved machinery for the cigar manufacturing business. His patents proved valuable and correspondingly his own value to an employer rose. He became editor of a little sheet known as the *Tobacco Trade Journal*. In a word, a life of comparative comfort opened before him.

Then, as later, he deliberately turned his back on such a life. His ambition was to be a theatrical manager, and when he had enough money saved up from the tobacco business he leased

this man born in Germany had but little admiration for German singers. "They all want too much money," he used to say, whatever he felt of admiration for the great Wagner. He knew little indeed of musical history and confined himself to two or three modern composers, French and Italian, but his outspoken contempt for the "old masters" found warrant in the taste of the public.

His first operatic season bore out his judgment. At the start of the second, "Thais" on its first night attracted a house of curiosity. It drew real admirers before the first week was done and the same may be said of other modern scores first introduced by Hammerstein. But while his judgment of what the public wanted in opera in those days hit the bull's eye, his triumph is not properly to be attributed to chance. It is a great task to summon from nothing a fine company for opera, a great orchestra, the scenes, the costumes, indeed to evolve the setting merely in a house without tradition is a task that would stagger most imaginations. Hammerstein carried it out in cold blood.

How He Bought an Opera.

He meant first of all to triumph, and the cause of music, if it were to be furthered, came secondary. His doubts about "Pelleas and Melisande" as represented by himself and the commercial decision he rendered in the case of "Thais" would prove that no case was to be omitted which should attract people to his opera. He had never heard a certain new opera, but while waiting in the drawing room of Cavalletti in Paris as she was running over some new music with a friend, Hammerstein jumped to the conclusion that the piece was the much heralded score, and cutting short his interview with the diva he rushed to the composer to sign a contract for the exclusive rights for America.

"But will you not hear my music?" asked the famous Massenet. "Afterward! Afterward!" replied the busy Hammerstein.

Following that eventful first year when all signs had failed and only the audacious impresario had won, Hammerstein became in outward appearance and manner a changed man. His milieu now lived up to what he had said was the true impresario model. Gone were the shabby, shuffling, and the hoarse voice singing its own strange compositions. Now in immaculate garb under the famous high hat Hammerstein demanded and received the homage of his singers and the deference of the public. Accepted as an arbiter of music, he turned his local facilities to other arts besides opera. He did not hesitate to pass upon a book or a picture. He was of the moderns in all these things. Listen to a thing he often said, for it is illuminating of the man:

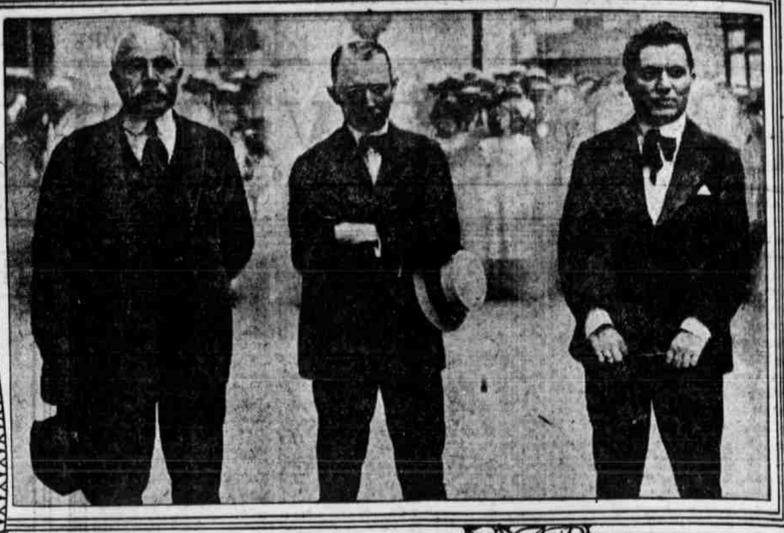
His Scorn of the Classics.

"What do we need of the art and literature and music of dead people? These were made for their own age and race by the men whose names we read on tombstones. The twentieth century when they composed and we hear them here like eavesdroppers."

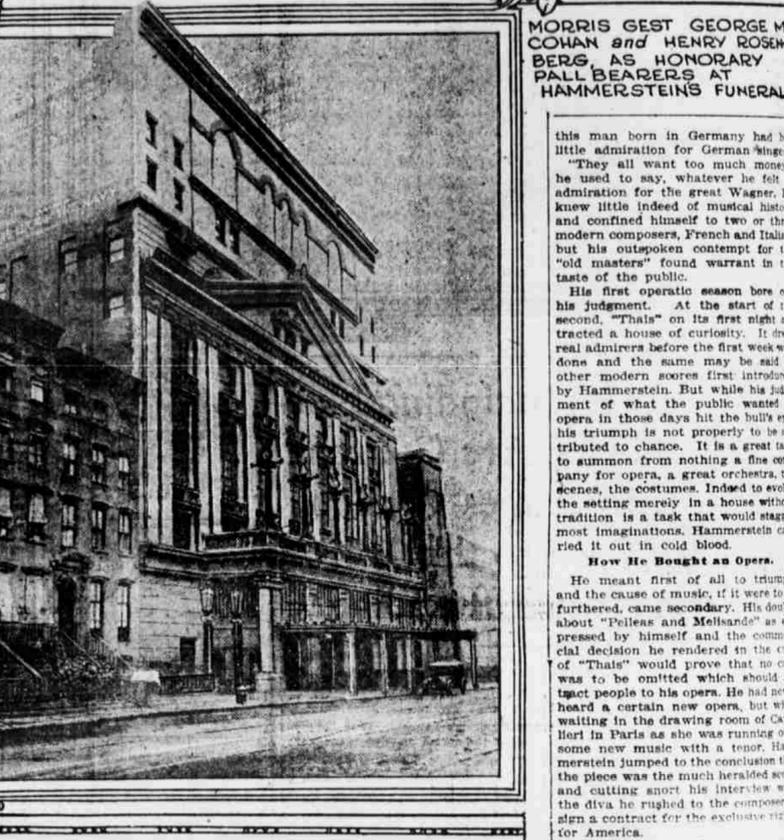
The Richard Strauss operas are of our day and we can hear them without eavesdropping, apparently. Hammerstein presented "Salome" and "Electra" as if their composer had thrown his scores at the public. In Hammerstein's last year at the Manhattan Opera House he offered a bill made of both these ultra modern scores. Such generosity stunned the public.

Now came the moment when Hammerstein was to be bribed to silence. A cold million and two hundred thousand dollars took him for a period of years out of the character he dearly loved to play. In explaining the arrangement he made with the directors of the Metropolitan Opera House the impresario laid stress on the fact that he had endured in common with the elder house and his disappointment in Philadelphia and London and his need of rest.

Most men would have taken the money and enjoyed life on it. Not so Hammerstein. Or rather just so Hammerstein. His way of enjoying life was to produce; he could not rest. He spent a large part of the money in building the Lexington Avenue Opera House and he lived waiting for April 20, 1920, to come around, which kept remove the legal restraint that kept him from producing opera. As he lay on his dying bed in the Lenox Avenue Hospital, without fearing that it was his dying bed, he outlined new great plans.



MORRIS GEST GEORGE M. COHAN AND HENRY ROSENBERG AS HONORARY PALL BEARERS AT HAMMERSTEIN'S FUNERAL



The MANHATTAN OPERA HOUSE