

Philadelphia Providing Opera For The Masses

By JACK SMITH
PHILADELPHIA, April 2—(Wide World)—The guys who yell at baseball umpires also go to the opera here.

Hepcats and jitterbugs rub elbows with jeweled and ermine-clad socialites and high school kids tag along with grandpa when the Philadelphia opera company produces.

"Why?" asks Impresario David Hocker. "Because it's opera for the masses."

The company—composed almost entirely of men and women in their twenties—has flouted practically every hallowed tradition in the operatic book to enable Hocker to say that.

It produces only in English—when the traditionalists call for the original tongues. It limits the "round-the-middle dimensions of the artists—when some of the world's best have been portly. It casts only young people in youthful parts—although gray-haired grand-dads for generations have played the roles of gay young swains.

It lets only men portray male characters—yet Seibel in "Faust," Cherubino in "The Marriage of Figaro," and Cetavian in "Der Rosenkavalier," for example, have been played by women since the parts were created.

"Look," says Hocker, "how can we get a rise out of an audience with a woman making love to a lyric soprano?"

"We're introducing the average American to good music. When we get him in to see a good show with a good plot, he suddenly realizes that the music with it isn't so bad after all. But it has to be a good show before he'll come in.

"So we don't allow ham histrionics. We don't have shabby or over-ornate scenery. We don't let pampered prima donnas stop the flow of dramatic action to bow after singing arias. We don't conceal humor and pathos in Italian, French or German, which three-fourths of an audience won't understand.

"And the result is opera that fans the enthusiasm of the critics, the man in the street and the guy in the stiff shirt."

The company, Hocker says, is the first to work without a prompter. It rehearses each production tediously, fires singers who can't learn their parts.

And it has no stars. A tenor playing a bit character today may play a title role next week.

Paradoxically, after breaking such revered traditions, the Philadelphians in some measure have fulfilled the artistic aspirations of operatic greats, and near-greats from Christoph Willibald Gluck to Deems Taylor. For most composers have urged emphasis on drama. Gluck created a minor furor with the request as far back as the middle Eighteenth Century.

The artists now giving new life to his hopes grew up in the era of talkies and blood-and-thunder westerns and have a hearty respect for action and melodrama. They're

all Americans, and typically American.

Sylvan Levin, 39-year-old conductor and artistic director, a protégé of Leopold Stokowski, once was a honky-tonk piano player and William Hess, 26, a tenor, formerly was a Hagerstown, Md., football hero and blacksmith's assistant.

Soprano Frances Guyer, 25, was a model in a Los Angeles department store.

Howard Vanderburg, 23, a baritone discovered by Lawrence Tibbett, formerly played tympani in a Buffalo high school band.

Brenda Lewis, a soprano who joined the company at 16 and has just turned 20, clerked in a five and dime store in Sunbury, Pa. Dorothy Sarnoff, another soprano, 23, sang in church choirs in New York city.

Basso James Luts, also 23, read meters for a Staten Island gas company.

Richard Deneau, 30, was a three-letter athlete and fancy diving champion at Ohio State university.

Hocker himself, who at 30 is called the nation's youngest major impresario, is a former bank clerk who never saw an opera or heard a symphony until 10 years ago.

"Someone interested me in the Philadelphia youth concert series (Leopold Stokowski's) and I was made a committeeman, then a bouncer," he says. "I once kicked out Eugene Ormandy for being over the audience age limit."

Ormandy now is the orchestra's conductor, Stokowski's successor.

The bouncer and the former beer-parlor piano player, Levin, met at the youth series and thus was the "Opera For The Masses" company born.

They first startled Philadelphia music circles by announcing they'd produce only in English.

Then they dropped a bombshell by setting themselves up as censors of the works of the masters. They said some of the best-known operas would not bear translation—"if only for the reason that they're weak, flimsy stories."

Last month Deems Taylor selected them to world-premiere his latest, "Ramuntcho."

In the same month Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt watched them in a slangy English production of Mozart's "Così Fan Tutte" and called it delightful.

Next year, with expected increasing patronage from both the rank-and-file and main liners, they expect to break the last operatic tradition still intact in America.

They believe they'll finish the season entirely self-supporting.

Part of the reason for this is a national tour booked by one of the nation's best known managers, 4

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