

MAUD POWELL'S THOUGHTS ON OPERA IN AMERICA

From Maud Powell's Scrapbooks

First Published in the *New York Sun*, date unknown

"English Grand Opera as an Artist Sees It," *Chicago Evening Post*, 14 August 1913

"Maud Powell's View of the Future of Grand Opera in New York," *Western Musical Herald*, Chicago, October 1913; "The Future of Grand Opera," *The Etude*, 1913

New York ought to be large enough to support two grand opera houses. The expense of opera with high priced "stars" can only be met by making of opera a social function, as at the Metropolitan Opera House. In anticipation of municipal opera, the second opera house should have a good ensemble: i.e. a good orchestra, good chorus, good scenery, good costumes and good artists, all without running to sensationalism. The house should be smaller than the Metropolitan and the price of admission lower, so that the big general public of poor and medium rich music lovers can afford to go, and can both see and hear when they do go. Should such an opera house be reasonably well patronized, and the public neither begged nor hood-winked into subscribing, then we can work for municipally supported opera. When we have municipal opera, then, *and* then only, can we claim with some show of truth, that we are an essentially musical community.

Personally, the opera does not fill me with awe. It seems to me often ridiculous and incongruous, rather than edifying. The various arts employed are so maimed and weakened to subserve each other that the aesthetic sense is constantly offended. Scenic painting is not painting in its highest form, operatic acting is at best, conventional, and a poor substitute for real mimetic art. Librettos are almost invariably better "working" librettos if not burdened with too much literary or poetic value, while the music, which is the *raison d'être* of the whole thing, could still exist in its highest forms if opera had never been invented. Opera's appeal is sensational. In small or young communities where the musical public is not large enough to support both opera and the symphony or quartet concerts, the latter, which are the more finely educational and of truer musical *value*, must suffer neglect. The love of glamour will prevail, controlling the situation in favour of the more blatant and pretentious art, thus retarding genuine musical progress.

Operas should be sung in the language in which they are conceived. *Parsifal* in English, *Péleas and Mélisande* in German, *Boris* in Italian, *Lucia* in Dutch are inconceivable to me. The meaning of words does not seem to matter much in opera - who ever hears enough of them to enlighten him as to the plot without reference to the libretto? - but the sounds of the words matter, for they should be in character with the music, a musical onomatopoeia which satisfies the aesthetic ear.

It is too soon to expect an American grand opera. We have no national school of composition. We have no distinctive musical utterance, in invention or style. Speaking broadly and of the nation at large, we are still in the ragtime stage – the first rung of the ladder of our national musical expression. The amount of money spent by our nation on art and music is no criterion of our culture, but it is a splendid criterion of its intentions and ambitions and augurs well for future development.

That our language is expressive and singable, I am convinced. If the reader does not agree, let him, at the first opportunity, go to the nearest Victrola shop and listen to the Scotchman, Harry Lauder, make our language rich and unctuous in “The Wee Hoos Mang the Heather.”

There is another point about this all-opera-in-English question. Like arbitrary phonetic spelling, it is an insular attitude toward education and culture. It puts a premium on ignorance and philistinism and tries to justify mental laziness. We are “born equal” in these free United States. Let us give the words a noble interpretation: born with equal rights to the chances of improvement and development, not born with equal rights to lag behind the standards of other and older nations.

From the Archive of The Maud Powell Society for Music and Education