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THE AMERICAN GIRL IN OPERA

The How and the Why of Her

by Theodora Bean

"An American girl studying in Europe should live in a private family of the middle class and never speak nor think in English."

"Schools for voices here offer no such apprenticeship as those on the Continent.

"When successful, the American girl has earned every bit of her glory."

NEW YORK, January 4.

WHY do so few American girls arrive in opera? They possess voices equally as good in power and tone as the European, study with the same masters on the Continent, yet the Europeans are chosen by impresarios and the Americans are left to pursue the battle for Metropolitan recognition and opportunity.

Paris, Munich, Vienna, Berlin, are full of girl students admirably equipped, yet nothing much is left for them except studying on, hoping on, cloaking their tragedies, stifling their disappointments.

Nearly all who have been given a chance have made good, but the number is amazingly small when one considers how many there are of them and how constant is the demand for voices here.

This was the burden of a thought I brought to Mme. Charles Cahier, Indianapolis born and bred, who went to Europe, worked arduously, became a leading member of the Imperial and Royal Court Opera in Vienna, the Royal Bavarian Prince Regent Theatre, Munich, and now is under contract with the goal of all opera persons, the Metropolitan Opera House.

"When a girl takes up her life in Europe she doesn't realize her handicap from the start, but she makes her struggle harder than it otherwise might be," said Madame Cahier. "She goes to live in an American pension and visits only the homes in the American colony. She is tied up by the traditions she was accustomed to at home, and in no way gets into the atmosphere of the place. She is not adjusting herself or fitting herself for singing the operas of a foreign language, a foreign role. When she sings she is not a part of the role; she is a decoration or an instrument, and that's all."

"WHAT should she do?"

"She should live in a private family of the middle class and never speak a word of English. She should think even in the language of the country, study its history, customs, and accumulate the atmosphere and knowledge necessary for her equipment.

"Then she will actually know what she is expressing in German, French, Italian," she went on. "And she shouldn't undertake any opera unless she is familiar with its language, its purpose, its possibilities."

"Does the fact that she holds onto her American name interfere with her success?"

"I think it does. It is a cruel thing to confess that from Americans not much is expected, and the girl has the double fight of overcoming that, of winning out on her own account and of showing herself an artist irrespective of birth.

"You may rest assured that when American girls are successful over there," she continued, "they have earned every bit of their glory, and when they are chosen to sing here they may regard it as almost phenomenal.

"Foreign voices are more thoroughly trained—foreign artists have the satisfaction of knowing nothing has been left undone in their preparation. When a woman is ready there for opera training she has passed through years of toil, but she knows what she is about. The schools for young voices here offer no such valuable apprenticeship."

Madame Cahier has a perfectly good right to speak with authority. She has sung the big contralto roles in German, French and Italian operas.

"I am a contralto who never tried to be a soprano," she explains.

MADAME CAHIER proceeded: "Possibly the girls we are speaking about are not surrounded by the right sort of critics. I believe in criticism. Not thoughtless, explosive praise, but real criticism."

This wasn't spoken as a cue, but it served as one, as at this point the studio was brightened by the entrance of M. Cahier, "my husband," a genial, big fellow and a real rooter for "madame."

The critic of the hearth!

M. Cahier, I was told, is not only a fireside critic, but his sympathies are so earnest and real that he holds the record for husbands of Metropolitan Opera House prima donnas.

When Madame Cahier has a throaty gasp on the eve of a performance M. Cahier has congestion of the larynx. When the opera is over M. Charles has weariness and temperamental relaxation.

The approach of a first night is heralded by M. Charles' disposition to neurasthenia, mild fever, cold chills and artistic trembling.

Madame Cahier permits him to worry and grow wrinkles if he must. She is used to singing, but somehow M. Charles never will be quite broken to opera.

He is almost amateurish in his zealous devotion to the family art, and admits he cannot get over it. He cannot overcome his tendency to take his wife's work seriously.

That he is a worth-while critic you have Madame Cahier's word.

"Do you like real critics around the house?" I asked of Madame Cahier. "Are they peaceful elements?"

"Yes. Before I had him my mother and sisters were the discoverers of the good and bad in me. Great friends who listen and applaud are not critics; they say all one does is perfect, that no one equaled the effort before in execution, style, quality. Such things mean death to an artist."

"I NEVER expressed an opinion without telling why," spoke up M. Cahier.

"You know why?" I put to him.

"Oh, he knows why," responded Madame. "He knows music thoroughly."

"Do you sing or accompany your wife?" I asked of the husband.

"Certainly not. If two artists in the same line marry one is a fool. I write for a living."

"Yes, and when he is pounding on a typewriter he knows all I am doing at the piano and interrupts me with suggestions, all of which have been beneficial to me."

"A sort of conjugal coach," I ventured.

"No. A friend; an understanding, wise friend," answered Madame Cahier.

I really didn't intend this to be a man's interview or a little first aid to the Only Their Husbands' Club, but prima donnas' husbands have a way of gliding gracefully into household conversations.

Madame Gadski's husband has it; so has Jeanne Maubourg's and Ethel Parks' and Madame Delna's and Madame Calve's; but not Madame Alda's Signor Gatti-Casazza. He is the one shrinking anemone among the other halves of divas. He is not a "comrade" in the sisterhood of voice promoting.

M. Cahier has an additional responsive note—he is quick on his feet when the telephone rings, and it was during a "call" lapse that I got another moment for questions and answers.

"Did you have an idea of a future in opera when you were singing in the best concerts in Indianapolis?" I asked.

"No, not at all. Curiously, I never thought of the opera—they call it 'grand' opera in Indianapolis. I was quite content to study, sing in the choir and make my voice agreeable to my friends, until one day the older Coquelin heard me and exclaimed:

"'You must get away from Indianapolis. You must study in Europe. You are a great artist, an incomparable artist, and I advise you to go at once.' And I went.

"I HAVE been going ever since, thanks to his incentive, and the road I found fascinating and alluring, though covered with endless work. My experience has convinced me that every American woman who hopes to accomplish her ambition in opera must get her training in the countries that supply it.

"It will be a long time before adequate preparation will be offered her here. The chances are it never will, especially as the best operas are written in Europe and require the language, tradition, atmosphere and setting of the country where they are born."

"Have you been back to Indianapolis since your engagement commenced with the Metropolitan?"

"I was there on a concert tour, and I was welcomed by a happy family—neighbors, friends, citizens, every one. Our people are loyal."

"You refer to Indianapolis and not to Americans in general?"

"I refer to the audiences here that I have sung before. I have no fault to find personally, but I do recognize there is an instinctive prejudice against home talent the argument being that for the same price Americans can hear the voices from the other side."

"If each American singer finds the same sympathy and endorsement what does that argue?"

"We are all exceptions, then, because it is an unwritten law of box offices—or a superstition perhaps—that we feel we are destined to overcome in spite of the influences obviously arrayed against us."

"Have 'pulls' done much to further the home girl who wants to win out?"

"Frequently they permit her to be heard and judged; always bear that in mind—to be judged! But if she hasn't merit there is no definite place ahead for her. She flutters like one of those electric lights in Broadway. She dazzles the curious and then she disappears."

"ARE opera singers apt to be negligent of the part acting takes in a production?"

"Pitiably so. For myself, I took the best dramatic training—also under Coquelin's advice—and worked as diligently as if my whole career depended upon my ability to act. Look at many of our American girls. They have pure, clear, sweet voices, and we wonder why their futures aren't secure. Watch them while they are singing—their wooden bodies, angular arms—they are all legs, arms, hands, feet. Anatomically they don't get together.

"If a girl really wants to succeed," she continued, "she must, as I say, know the language of the country in which the operas are written, be familiar with the customs of the people, be open to every bit of enlightenment regarding the traditions, be willing to be a part of the work whether she is singing the greatest or the smallest role; be so trained in dramatic execution that unconsciously she follows out the best and truest interpretation of the part assigned her."

"What women in the opera embody both the singing and acting qualities?" I asked.

"Madame Calve was the ideal. She was quite as good an actress as she was a singer."

"And Geraldine Farrar?" I put.

"Certainly; especially in 'Madama Butterfly.'"

"And Mary Garden?"

"No one denies Miss Garden's powers as an actress."

"With whom did you study?"

"Jean de Reszke for my voice and Victor Capoul for dramatic work."

MADAME CAHIER talks without gestures or smirks. She seems well satisfied with life and art so far, and believes in her capacity for doing more of the things she has set about to achieve.

She doesn't discourage others from following in her footsteps, but seeks rather to wave the red lantern and caution them about the approach.

It wasn't the telephone after all. M. Cahier returned quite put out. He had explained to Central in Swedish, German and French that he did not want to be interrupted again on a false alarm.

"Why in Swedish?" I asked, as that was not included in the opera qualifications.

"I am a Swede," he explained. "Here in this country you think Swedes are dull, listless people. We are the Italians of the North in reality. We are full of fire—a hot-headed, volcanic race."

"It was the doorbell," suggested Madame Cahier. "It is still ringing."

They are living in an apartment at 158 Madison avenue, with living rooms on one floor and the studio a flight of stairs above. It has rose and gold furniture, rose lights, rose rugs and hangings, a piano and typewriter, the typewriter so situated it can be worked easily while the operator is facing the piano and attending to his accustomed functions as listener, critic, friend.

"IF he ever says harsh things do you weep and refuse to speak to him?" I asked of Madame Cahier.

"Oh, no. I am not that sensitive. My sensitiveness doesn't take the form of expressing itself in a way that would be detrimental to my work. I need his judgment, because he knows, and he has helped me enormously."

"Does Madame Cahier criticize the books, the articles you write?" I put to him.

"Oh, no; oh, no. She approves—she disapproves never. She is very nice and pleasant about it. We are friends, we are ever congenial, and we laugh much together. We do not wear long faces."

M. Cahier relaxed comfortably into a pink armchair.

"He needs this moment of rest," I thought to myself. "Maybe he will doze peacefully when I am gone. Madame Cahier," I recalled, "is to sing to-morrow, and the sympathetic critic's constitution must be prepared for the strain."

So I silently went away.

Madame Cahier before she annexed Sweden to her address was nationally well known as Mrs. Morris Black and distinguished as a clever woman and artist possessing an irresistible charm and a beautiful voice.

That she is as popular now as Madame Cahier is evidenced by the genuinely warm reception which she invariably meets. Of course, only a few years have elapsed, but the time was sufficient for her to marry again and win fame, additional popularity and rise to an important place among the stars of the Metropolitan.

Although at concerts Madame Cahier chooses a programme made up entirely of songs in foreign languages she showed recently that she was able to recall her English when a good excuse presented itself. The occasion was in Indianapolis, her native town. She saw James Whitcomb Riley in a box and immediately sang "There, Little Girl, Don't Cry."

The Hoosiers first cheered the poet and then declared: "We have not lost our Eurydice, but found her."

"And now I mean to handle your witnesses without gloves," said a counsel, whose witnesses had met with rather severe treatment from the other side.

"Indeed! That's more than I should like to do with yours," smilingly retorted his learned friend.

Madame Cahier. Drawn by H. F. Nonnamaker.

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"My husband is my best critic. I permit him to take life seriously---for me.

"I am a contralto, who never tried to be a soprano."

—Madame Cahier.

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