ADDENDUM

Some reflections on grand opera

Herewith some queries and observations which have repeatedly come into my mind over the thirty years or more that I have been associated, as a throat specialist, within this field:

1. Why are so many Opera-Lovers so specialized? Some will adore anything Italianate, whilst others' lives are almost built about the next cycle of Wagner's 'Ring'.

2. How can they endure so much bad acting, and lack a sense of the ridiculous? If you shut out the sound many scenes would not measure up to talented amateur acting.

3. Why does it all have to go on so long? Shakespeare could say it in half the time, and Peter Shaffer in less. Apart from the traditional applause, I often suspect that much of it really means 'thank God its over at last and we can go and down a pint or get to bed'.

4. There is so often a constant battle between Musical Director and singers, usually in the matter of volume of sound. Apart from the acoustics of the House (which is a complicated, scientific matter) it usually comes down to a simple problem. If the orchestra is making too much noise for the singer to be heard, then either get it to play quieter, or engage a singer who can sing louder. (I know that there are complexities here but maintain that the above is basic.)

5. As Dickens wrote, it is an extraordinary thing, but it is difficult to persuade people to buy tickets for a performance unless they can be made to believe that the 'House is Sold Out'. There is no reason why a leading Opera house could not engage its world-famous performers until everyone in that city had attended if they wanted to. But Dickens was right. Madame X is only giving five performances this season—so up go the prices, the seats sell, and then poor Madame X has to fly half across the world to do it all again. (Next year she will be back, but will have to tire herself re-rehearsing a rôle she knows backwards because the cast and/or M.D. is different.)

It is really quite crazy. If Scofield or Gielgud 'signs' for six months, well that makes sense and everyone is pleased, and after the first-night tension is over things settle down comfortably. Not so for the poor international singer.

6. One meets opera-going ladies (less gallantly, I call them crones, sitting around the guillotine waiting for heads to fall) whose great interest is 'will Madame X "crack" on a certain note, because she did last year in Chicago?' Well, dash it, what if she does? You have been listening to her on and off for four hours or more. If a leading actor gets a 'frog in his throat' during a soliloquy and has to pause to clear it, no one is going to mind, and it certainly will not be the 'talk of the interval'. Again, not so in the case of the poor Opera singer.

I have been making these observations for over a quarter of a century. But Grand Opera will still go on in its crazy and absurdly expensive way.

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