

THE COLLEGE STUDENT AND THE SINGING OF GRAND OPERA AND RECITAL

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing issued, in 1963, a pronouncement entitled "The High School Student And The Singing Of Grand Opera", in which the belief was stressed that the main objective of all singing during the adolescent, formative years should be the establishment of correct vocal habits, and also that the repertoire undertaken by these young singers for public performance should train, not strain the voices. These same principles hold true with regard to the singing of the more advanced students in our colleges and conservatories.

Performances of opera on the college level are spreading widely and rapidly. Requirements for both Junior and Senior Song Recitals are often unnecessarily taxing. The American Academy believes, therefore, that a statement on these subjects will prove valuable in guiding the efforts of young singers. Part I of this paper will deal with the singing of Opera. Part II will cover the field of college Song Recitals.

I

OPERA

There is a wealth of fine young voices in our country. They are being trained in great numbers not only in our private studios but also in our colleges and conservatories of music where it has been made possible for the student to couple vocal training with academic studies leading to a degree. Many of these institutions carry on programs of opera production, some on an ambitious scale. There are many positive values in these programs. With only a few opera houses in America, most of them having short seasons, there are too few opportunities for singers to acquire the needed experience in this field, and college opera offers the chance to acquire repertoire, learn acting, sing with an orchestra, and perform before an audience. These performances also have considerable value in introducing audiences to opera and in helping to develop public interest in this form of art. At this point, however, we are confronted with a basic question. Can college students qualify as singers of opera under the current strenuous pressures of academic life?

The adequate performance of opera is an exceedingly complex undertaking. It demands a voice trained to a high degree of proficiency, unusual stamina, musicianship, and acting ability. An opera singer must be able to convey the emotions of a role to the audience with clarity and sincerity, as well as produce beautiful sounds and create a brilliant picture. It would be extraordinary if such gifts were to mature in a young singer just reaching his or her twenties. Technical uncertainty and vocal immaturity can make performance of an opera a source of worry, tension and frustration instead of offering the young singer a glimpse of the unique joy which a mature artist derives from this complex art.

Operatic singing on a professional scale (full performances in public) calls for the coordinated use of a well-developed, well-trained body, in excellent health. Full vocal development is rarely attained before the twenty-fifth year, and to attempt complete performances before full maturity, while maintaining an academic schedule, is to invite disaster. Many potentially fine young voices have been severely damaged by two or three years of college opera.

The Academy believes, therefore, that undergraduate students should be given progressive opportunities which will gradually take them to the threshold of actual professional performance. When the voice is ready for operatic repertoire, the suggested sequence of study is — First, the operatic area; Second, duets and trios; Third, stage deportment and acting. With adequate training a gifted Junior student might perform a scene or two on stage with piano accompaniment. By the end of the college year he could possibly undertake an aria or scenes with orchestral accompaniment. The Senior student might assume a slightly heavier program, but it should be kept in mind that in the case of scenes from opera, the student is adding the heavy burden of both musical and stage rehearsals to his regular program of academic studies, while the fatigue of complex private and college life still draws on his energy.

The American Academy believes that the participation of undergraduates in operatic performances should be limited to the lighter operas; for example, Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro", "Cosi fan tutte", Paisiello's "Barbiere", and other operas of similar classification (possibly omitting some of the more dramatic arias). Shorter operas such as Puccini's "Il Trittico" and a number of contemporary scores may also be used. A chamber orchestra of perhaps twenty instruments

and a hall with a suggested seating capacity of about four hundred are recommended for such performances. If an opera is repeated, it is important that there be a day of rest between performances. As an example of too heavy a schedule, we know of one university at which four performances of the same opera were sung on successive nights with the same cast, preceded by a dress rehearsal on the evening before the first performance. It should be remembered that contracts given professional opera singers never require more than two performances on successive nights, or more than three performances in a week.

If more dramatic operas are scheduled, such as "La Bohème", "Rigoletto", etc., a young singer should sing no more than half of the opera, or preferably only one act. Singers can be rotated in repeat performances so that each one will have performed the entire opera in public before the series is concluded. Unless the institution presenting the opera has been built up in publicity to the rank of an opera house, the audience will accept such an arrangement and derive added interest through changes in the cast.

Operas demanding an exceptional amount of vocal power and physical stamina, such as "Aida", "Il Trovatore", etc., also the Wagnerian operas, should not be attempted on the college level. Young American singers face an added difficulty of formidable proportions when the opera is sung in a foreign language. For that reason English is strongly recommended.

Although college opera has been a valuable help in the advancement of that beautiful art in a country where too few professional opera houses exist, no undergraduate student should be called upon to perform large-scale dramatic roles, in large auditoriums, with full orchestra when they cannot devote all their time and energy to such performances — nor even if they could. In those institutions in which opera is performed under conditions as indicated above, it should be sung by graduate students with several years of intensive training — or faculty members.

II

RECITAL

A customary requirement for a Bachelor of Music Degree in our American colleges and conservatories is the performance of a Senior Recital. The program of this recital usually includes a solo cantata or an oratorio aria, at least one operatic aria in its original language; three groups of songs from the German, French and Italian repertoires; and a group of contemporary songs in English — three or four songs in each group, totaling some sixteen numbers in four languages.

The physical and nervous effort required for singing such a program is very great. If a singer has fully mastered his vocal skill, such a performance will tax his vital strength but there will be no danger to his development. If a singer is still groping for his full vocal balance, as is often the case with college Seniors, the rehearsing and performing of such a program is definitely dangerous. Distortions of correct vocal functioning through excessive efforts during the formative years are apt to become ingrained in a young singer's system and remain as a permanent hindrance to a successful singing career. Physically as well as artistically this is a case of "too much too soon".

The art of singing such a recital is indeed complex. It demands vocal mastery, musical knowledge, a singing command of several languages, a full understanding of the texts (and this involves an intimate acquaintance with the background and personality of the poet, and a knowledge of the style of the period in which the song was written). Added to this there must be the ability to create a different mood for each song and to experience intense emotion while maintaining physical poise. While such a Senior recital might be justified as a **superficial test** of a student's ability to meet both academic and artistic requirements, how can four years education as a voice major adequately provide the student with the essential elements of recital singing?

Language study in American colleges generally consists of one year of Italian, one year of German, and one year of French, and the usual English courses. By the Senior year this necessarily superficial knowledge inevitably becomes somewhat blurred. It is an enormous task to reproduce phonetically German, French and Italian verses if one is not intimate with the languages. If one does not feel the inherent music of the language and is not able to let this music change the color of one's voice or influence one's facial expression, one cannot interpret artistically. A much more thorough knowledge of a language is needed for successful recital singing.

The same considerations apply where Junior recitals are required. Such a program often consists of an oratorio aria, two groups of songs in two foreign languages, another group in English, and one operatic aria in the original language, all this with one less year of study and experience.

The American Academy believes that the study of singing by college students should be made more in **depth and concentration**, and less in **quantity and dispersion**. Certainly foreign languages should be studied at greater length. It would seem wiser for a student to become aware of one foreign language than to confuse him with several.