

Chamber Opera in Palestine

An Interesting Sidelight on Recent Developments

By ERICH GOTTGETREU

IT is by no means a simple matter to interview a theatrical manager in Palestine. When I tried to put my hand on Benno Fraenkel, former stage-manager of the Schiller Opera in Altona (Germany), now manager of the newly established Chamber Opera in Palestine, I had to pick him out from among a group of stone breakers. One of the group happened to be whistling an air from Offenbach's "Die Schöne Helena." I had hit upon the right man.

"Yes, my dear Sir," said the cheerful stone-breaker, quite undismayed at the slimming job he was pursuing, "to be a theatrical manager in Palestine is more in the nature of an idealistic than a profitable undertaking."

Practically all the members of the company lead a "double life."

Rudolf Lazar, the bass, formerly of the State Opera in Wiesbaden, is a beekeeper of the first rank.

Samuel Berlin, the tenor, and Joseph Shapiro (formerly of the Volksbuehne in Berlin) are building labourers. During the midday interval they entertain their fellow workers with theatrical gossip apt, at times, to raise the roof . . .

Mrs. Dela Gotthelft, formerly leading contralto at the State Theatre in Kassel, fascinates alike by the sweetness of her voice and the elegance of the dresses she designs. She is the *directrice* of a dress salon.

If we still mention the name of Eli Kurz, lyrical soprano, Mirjam Segall, lyrical soprano, Karl Salomon, conductor, and Werner Sommerfeld, bandmaster, we have in-

roduced practically the whole of the company. The orchestra numbers about fifteen players; they, too, follow another profession. Incidentally, there are no prompters in Palestine. The artists have to be word perfect in their Hebrew roles.

Thus the apparatus is seen to be small, necessarily so, not merely on financial grounds. Large-scale opera on heroic-pathetic lines is alien to Palestine. Lavish expenditure would ill accord with the simplicity and soberness of Jewish Palestine in the making.

The aim of Fraenkel's enterprise is to provide high-class entertainment and by means of his chamber opera fill a gap which had so far been apparent in the rich theatrical fare of this country. The "Comedia del Arte," Old Italian and French composers, naturally in Hebrew translations, will be mainly drawn upon until the Palestinian composers will themselves provide operettas based on traditional and original themes, of which Bracha Zwira, the Palestinian Massary, a racy Yemenite artist, would be the ideal interpreter. So far Offenbach has been victorious all along the line. His "Girl of Elizondo" was acclaimed by thousands in the cities and villages. Benno Fraenkel produced it with great taste and humour and Karl Salomon conducted most charmingly. The latter was also responsible for the score. He had already acquired a reputation for his Offenbach revivals in Germany. In order also to cater for the patrons of more serious music (and with certain pedagogical views in mind), a small classical work is to be included in the programme every time. The last performance of Offenbach was set off by "La Serva Padrona" by Pergolesi. The next

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item of that type will be "The Drunken Kadi" by Gluck.

So far every performance has paid for itself. But the preliminary expenses are heavy. The scenes are modelled on the rich colouring and vivacity of the Russian stage—not a cheap model. And the stage effects and properties have to be very solidly made, because like every other Palestinian theatre, the chamber opera has to be a travelling company in the European sense of the word. Moreover, the rehearsals of the soloists with the orchestra take up a great deal of costly time. This is not merely a matter of personal ambition, but the general theatrical level demands a high standard. The salaries of the artists are infinitesimal.

Fraenkel is running the enterprise at his own risk; no organisation has yet been found to share the responsibility with him, though it is intended to establish an "Association of Friends of Chamber Opera." In the three main cities of Palestine, under the Patronage of the High Commissioner, Committees have already been formed with a view to launching an appeal. The members of the Association are to guarantee a certain monthly sum, possibly in the shape of a subscription. This would not merely provide a fixed income putting the whole enterprise on a solid basis, but would, at the same time, enable the engagement of Jewish artists from abroad, a far too risky procedure under present circumstances.

The interview on the high road had come to an end. The foreman was calling to Fraenkel to go on breaking stones . . .

WHEN I AM DEAD

By Chaim Nachman Bialik

When I am dead, mourn thus for me and say:

There lived a man, and see, he is no more;

Timeless to death he went,

And in the middle day

His song of life was rent;

Ah, pity! for he had yet one song more,

And now that song is lost, and lost for aye.

Ah! pity, for he had a harp—a soul

To live and speak; and as the singer spanned

The secrets of his heart therewith, the strings

Spoke 'neath his hand.

But of his secrets one was hid in heart,

His fingers skimmed about it and around,

One string was left for dumb, and till this day

It gives no sound.

It is great pity, all her days this string,

Panting in silence, trembles for her song;

And for her love to rescue she may yearn,

Desire and long,

As the heart throbs for the invited guest,

And if he tarry she waits endless days,

To weep with hidden signs that he come not,

But still delays.

Now is there vexation to dismay,

There lived a man, and see, he is no more,

For in the middle day

His song of life was rent.

Yet he had one song, one ballad more

And now that song is lost, and lost for aye.

—Translated by L. V. Snowman.