An Evening with two gifted friends in St. Petersburg

I had long endeavoured in my position at the Imperial Opera House to find talented musicians who could take up leading positions as budding conductors. We had some very gifted young men who had at last been urged to ask me if they could possibly conduct some performances. I was not too delighted, not in the least foreseeing what this would ultimately lead to. One named Branci, a really good chap, first-class coach, begged to be allowed to conduct "La Bohème," so one evening, I invited him to my home in order as I thought, to give him all the many tips I had learned from Puccini himself in London concerning the phrasing of each ensemble in the 2nd and 4th acts.

We started, I at the piano, Branci with the full score in front of him, a stick in his hand, and in my full view. He began clearing the air to the right, then to the left, and I endeavoured to sound all the way in one sweep, and kept at this until another, a much more tired man, who had exhausted himself, had to sit down for a breather. This pulled me up sharp. I had never had a strict technical lesson in my life. Nor did I know what was going on about his stock; I took it for granted we had all watched him closely during his rehearsals, so could find out for ourselves. If we couldn't manage the second part he just past on to the next piece, the next, the next, and generally fell to my lot to demonstrate a particular notion, but like the two in the 3rd of Beethoven which the Tarnows had just finished. As there were about 300 of us in the class, it sometimes became a real geniality, exciting for the class until the class room sang with: "We want Branci, we want Branci." I was anything but popular really, but they always were hoping I would bungle it with the bass — but that never happened. I suppose it was just in the blood, and my very great affection for my master seemed to lend me his wings where necessary. Branci as I said brought me up sharp.

I started to show him how one should conserve energy for a long opera in 4 acts — what would he have been like, eating the air indiscriminately when he came to the last act — "La Bohème" is alright. Not short acts, only play less than 1/2 hr each — but what about the "Tristan" of the Gods by Wagner, where the conductor and all concerned are hard at it for two very solid hours for each act. Then there are two acts to follow each well into the 90 minute aspect, with terrific force necessary in each act plus a rest for anyone. This opera is the greatest tax on sheer physical force of all the operas ever written, so far — Parsifal by Meister Tristan are for less taxing. I started Branci off with a simple demonstration: Namely, the very fact, that opera is individually cut up to 20 or 25 minutes in the conductor's desk.
differ entirely from concert with the lighting is usually diffused all over

the rest from central lights from above, but not too opera - bright is of
paramount importance - esp that conductors desk for not only the eye but

the singer from a considerable distance must be able to see the beat & in many
instances when a great master is leading the opera his facial expression of tone

paramount importance on the character of the music & his inspiration
is very catching for all concerned from the greatest artist on the stage down to

the last man on the last desk in the orchestra - usually the triangle

so obviously the first rule is to so handle the stick that every moment is clearly
visible to all concerned, the technical way is to so clean the air on the bright
thrown up from the brightness of the paper of the fullscore eighty, the hands clearly +
the face effectually - obviously if you clean to right or to left away from
the desk you are futilely moving in the dark & is apt to distract more than help

everyone who depends on a guiding hand.