

The Art of Singing

By Edouard de Reszke.

SCHÉMES of life are often illusory, and it was particularly so in my own career. Officially, I was intended for an agriculturist, and I studied with this end in view at Proschau, in Silesia. During a school holiday I was in Paris, just prior to the initial performances of "Aida" in that city in 1876. Verdi was conducting the rehearsals of his work. I acted as the escort of my sister Josephine, then engaged at the Grand Opera House, and my mother. We were welcome social guests, and went about a great deal. I was regarded by my family as a kind of substitute if not an understudy for my sister, and was frequently offered in her stead when she was unwilling or too much fatigued to "oblige" with a song. To the piano therefore I went, whether or no, and sang as best I could. Chance thus gave me quite a reputation in French society as an amateur singer. Among the guests upon one occasion when I thus sang was M. Escudier, Verdi's French publisher. Through his agency it was not long after that I was called upon to sing to the great master. Not suspecting the object of this hearing I went and sang at Verdi's request the part of the King in "Aida." The ordeal over, all he said was, "You'll do," and, turning to Escudier, who was present, requested him to take me to the theater and provide me with a costume! Argument with Verdi was in vain, and so between indignation and amusement I related my adventure to my mother and sister, saying to them that I would be subject to neither Verdi nor Escudier, who apparently assumed that I belonged to them by right of discovery. Learning subsequently from Escudier, however, that Verdi had selected me out of the many bassos proposed to him for the part of the King, and certainly expected me at the rehearsal next day, I finally agreed to sing in the opera as Verdi wished. With but two rehearsals I went through the ordeal of a debut in Paris side by side with such artists as Stoltz, Masini, Waldmann

and Pandolfini, and Verdi himself at the conductor's desk! It seemed when I found myself upon the stage for the first time that I must perish with fright, but, somehow, the crooked paths were made straight and things went pretty well.

The second important step in my career was also an affair of chance. I happened to be in Milan with Jean on his own business when Massenet, Ricordi and Hartmann (Massenet's publisher) met me in the Galloria, and all but compelled me to sing the two bass parts in the "Roi de Lahore," which was then being produced at the Scala. Paris and Milan were good beginnings, and immediately I had offers for Madrid, Lisbon and for all the principal towns of Italy. Verdi had not forgotten me, and intrusted me with a part in "Simon Boccanegra" and "Ernani" on the occasion of special performances of these operas. In due time I was engaged by Messrs. Gye for the London season where, with an interval of two years, I have sung ever since 1880. After London came the engagement to the Paris Opera House, and subsequently that for the United States. Now my time is entirely divided between London and America, and thus things will continue so long as my services are likely to be needed. I may say, without conceit, that I am rather proud of my record in so far as comprehensiveness of repertory is concerned. I sing no less than eighty-five operas, some of them, like "Lohengrin" for example, in three languages—viz., French, Italian and German. During my career I created seventeen parts between Milan, Paris and London—namely, in "Aida," "Herodlade," "Le Cid," "Patrie," "Aben Hamet," "Demouls," "Velleda," "Elaine," "Sigurd," "Lady of Longford," "Glaconda," "Re di Lahore," "Maria Tudor," "Don Giovanni d'Austria," "Simon Boccanegra," "Figliuol Prodigio" and "Elda." I was chosen by Gounod to sing "Mephisto" at the five hundredth performance of "Faust" at the Paris

Opera, and also for the jubilee performance of "Don Giovanni" as Leporello, when Gounod conducted the rehearsals.

When "Romeo et Juliette" was transferred from the Opéra Comique repertory to that of the Grand Opera, again Gounod intrusted me with the part of the Friar. I sang under his baton, as well as under Verdi's and Rubinstein's. Initially, I sang only in Italian and almost exclusively Italian works. All my vocal studies were directed toward the mastering of the art of *bel canto*, but, of course, without neglecting the principles of lyric declamation. In fact, the art of singing as understood by the old singers, whom I was privileged yet to hear, embraced much more than is generally supposed to-day. It certainly comprised declamation in a high degree. The current notion is that adepts of *bel canto* pure and simple cared merely about beauty of tone, vocal gymnastics and dodges in voice production. Not a bit of it. They all knew how to underline their phrases with accents, variety of expression and coloring the voice; and therein lies all the secret of lyric declamation. Coloring the voice is, of course, only

a figure of speech; what I mean by it is that the character you give to a vocal phrase should be so distinct as to convey to the hearer the sense of the situation even if the words are not understood. Sometimes you have to alter the character of your voice altogether, so as to suit the part dramatically or vocally. For example, the kind of speaking voice that does for Leporello would not answer for Marcel in "The Huguenots." And again you must color your voice differently for "Mephisto" than for "Don Basilio," for the King in "Lohengrin" or Tristram and Rodolfo in the "Sonnambula." Once you are master of your voice, having its full range under command and control, your industry must be applied to these all important details, and, above all, to articulation. What is song but speech writ large, and as every word of the orator, if it is to tell, must reach the listener with distinctness, so every syllable sung must be articulated with precision that the audience may understand as it hears. And the basis of the whole art of singing is the proper management of breath.

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