

# The Development of the Opera

by Charlotte Anderson

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Submitted to the University Department of  
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### Part 1.

In making a study of the history of the opera, we find that it was even more literary and artistic than it was musical--a direct outgrowth of the Renaissance enthusiasm for everything classic.

Late in the sixteenth century, in Florence, was a group of amateur poets, artists and musicians who met for the purpose of investigating the Greek dramas which had been re-discovered after centuries of neglect. These men held that the ancient Greek drama had been given in a sort of chant, and in their enthusiasm, made various attempts to reproduce in works of their own what they believed was the spirit of the classic drama. These early efforts may be taken as the beginning of opera as an art form, though music has always been a part of the drama, and in this sense, opera is as old as the drama itself.

Up to the time of these Florentines, music was

polyphonic. Madrigals were sung, but such a thing as expressive singing for the solo voice was unknown. Music had been fostered by the church, and naturally became adapted to the church's needs, until all music conformed to its modes. These church modes were scales derived from the Greeks, the intervals of which were unsuitable, as a general thing, to the development of the harmonic style of writing.

These Italians broke away from the church modes, and gave the actors solos to sing, supported by an orchestra behind the scenes. They tried to make the music follow as nearly as possible what would be the natural inflections of the human voice, the result being a sort of chant. They realized the importance of the chorus in the Greek play, so they introduced it, keeping in mind what they believed had been the case with classic drama, that the music and dancing had served only to heighten the dramatic effect.

In 1597 Caccini and Peri, two of this Florentine group, composed music to a drama "Dafne," the text by Rinuccini, another of their number. This would have

been the first opera, only it was privately produced and was not preserved.

In 1600 Peri was invited to write an opera for the marriage festivities of Henry IV of France and Maria di Medici, and for this occasion he wrote "Euridice," which was the first opera to have a public performance. An original copy of "Euridice" is in the Chicago museum. In examining the score one will note that the harmony which is only indicated is of the simplest; and the orchestra, the only purpose of which was to support the voice, consisted of a harpsichord, two lutes and a bass viol.

While Caccini and Peri produced opera in an effort to reproduce the classic Greek drama, Monteverde was the first to place it upon a firm basis as an art form in itself. Monteverde was an experienced musician, with pronounced ideas of harmony, and in advance of his time. His first opera, "Ariadne," was given in 1607 on the occasion of the marriage of Margaret of Savoy to the son of the Duke of Mantua; and while only a fragment remains of it, the "Lament" of Ariadne, that

fragment, is really beautiful, and makes it seem probable that the rest of the work must have been good.

Monteverde's next opera, "Orfeo," on the same subject as Peri's "Euridice," is very much more complex than the Florentine opera. It is much better written in the matter of dramatic arrangement, and in avoidance of monotony in the recitatives. The orchestra consisted of thirty-seven pieces, with combinations in groups, foreshadowing the present use of the orchestra. It was employed expressively and not, as formerly, merely to support the voices. Monteverde originated the tremolo and pizzicato for violins.

Before 1637, opera was for only the very wealthy, and of interest only to the cultured. Performances were given only on some very special celebration, and under the auspices of some wealthy patron. In 1637, however, the first public opera house was built, in Venice, and from that time such theatres spread with great rapidity.

With this popularization of the opera came, naturally, a change in its character. As long as it

had been confined to cultured people who understood the ideals of its founders, it was appreciated; but gradually, under these new conditions, the classical subjects were discarded, more popular stories were employed, and little by little the music became more rhythmical, regular and melodious, to suit the popular taste.

Naturally Venice became the operatic center for a while, and a number of composers were developed there, among whom Giovanni Garissimi is the most important. He is noteworthy not because he wrote operas, but because his oratorios and cantatas were very dramatic, and, showing a logical arrangement and definite melody, introduced the new style into the church, making rhythm and melody more prominent. Thus we come, in the Venetian school, to the turning point, the reversal of the ideals of the founders of opera. The dramatic interest began to be lost sight of, the singer coming to predominate over the actor.

In Rome, opera did not flourish on account of the disapproval of the church--a fact which gave Naples precedence over the Holy City in musical affairs.

Alessandro Scarlatti, a gifted Neapolitan composer, is responsible for the introduction of the recitative accompanied by full orchestra, and for the formulation of the aria. It was Scarlatti who first used the now familiar "da capo" aria--that is, the aria consisting of three parts, two contrasting sections, and then a repetition of the first part. He also perfected the so-called Italian overture, consisting of three movements, the first and last quick, and the middle one slow.

The typical Italian opera as Scarlatti left it was a succession of recitatives and arias, with but sparing use of the chorus, and dance, that had been important in the earlier operas.

The opera buffa was of later development than serious opera, was freer in form and more characteristic of the people. It made use of the bass voice, neglected in serious opera until the time of Rossini.

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"Notwithstanding the formalism of the Neapolitan school, which led to a regrettable neglect of the

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1. Baltzell, "History of Music."

dramatic significance of the opera by an over emphasis of the musical element, it was of no small importance to the development of music in general. By fixing the principle of form and melody at a time when both were vague and undetermined, Scarlatti laid the foundation for the great classical period, beginning with Haydn and Mozart and ending with Beethoven. This was his contribution to absolute music, which cannot exist without form, though its influence was disastrous to purity of form in that branch of the art which he particularly cultivated."

Italian opera spread to other countries to such an extent that during the eighteenth century the prevailing musical influence was Italian. The French, however, always original in matters of art, had a distinctly national school, though influenced by the Italians. French opera had its origin in the ballet of the seventeenth century, a mixture of dances and dialogues corresponding to the English masque. The French had a passion for dancing, and even when the Italian operas were given, the French composers

wrote ballets to be introduced between the acts, showing their interest in dance rather than in song.

Lully (1633-1707) was the founder of the French school, and incited by "Pomone," an opera by Robert Cambert, and produced in 1671, wrote from that time fifteen operas. He had a good sense of proper balance between the dramatic and musical elements. Lully was the first to elaborate and enlarge the overture, known as the French overture, and consisting of a slow movement, followed by an allegro, and sometimes closing with a slow movement again.

The Italian opera school did not have much influence in England. English opera sprang from the masque, and so the music was incidental and not continuous. Henry Purcell (1658-95), England's most gifted composer, wrote a great deal of this incidental music, and one really important opera, "Dido and Aeneas." In 1627 opera was introduced into Germany, the text of Rinuccini's "Dafne" being translated and set to music by Heinrich Schuetz. The Thirty Years War put a stop to further development until the establishment of

the Hamburg Opera late in the century.

In order to expect a hearing, German composers had to write operas to Italian texts. The church was alone open for the exercise of German musical talent, a fact which accounts for the remarkable production of sacred music in that century, and later, for the nature of the operas when they were written.

The first German opera, "Adam and Eve," was written by Johann Theile and produced in 1678. Other operas were brought out of like character and on biblical subjects, but by and by the Hamburg Opera under Rheinhard Kreiser and Handel became Italianized, the style cultivated being that of the Neapolitan school. By the middle of the eighteenth century the conventional Italian opera flourished to the exclusion of all other forms of the art. Handel wrote in this style, but many of his very beautiful ideas are lost there because these operas can never be revived. His best work is not in opera, and he contributed but little to its development. Handel's greatness is in the kindred form of oratorio, where he is a master.

The opera of this day was an artificial thing, its chief aim being to give singers an opportunity to show off their voices. Whether it suited the dramatic situation or not, there had to be a set number of arias composed in a certain way and arranged in a fixed order. There could be but six characters, three women and three men. No ensemble, except a duet, was permitted, and the chorus came in only for the finale. The singers had things pretty much their own way, changing compositions to suit their fancy. The composer lost sight of the dramatist almost entirely in ministering to the singer's whims. Opera remained in this state until the production in 1762 of Gluck's opera, "Orfeo." Gluck was an educated, travelled man of the world and had composed opera in the Italian style. But he became convinced that it was bad art, and argued a return to first principles, with the original idea that drama should be the basis of opera, with music always subservient to it. He considered opera of the time untrue to art and to life, and in "Orfeo" embodied his ideas on the subject. "Iphigenia and Aulus" and "Iphigenia in

Tauris," modeled after the Greek tragedies, are his greatest works.

In the preface to "Alceste," Gluck makes what may be regarded as a confession of faith. He says, in substance, "....I have resolved to avoid all those abuses which have crept into Italian opera through the mistaken vanity of singers and the unwise compliance of composers, and which have rendered it wearisome and ridiculous, instead of being what it once was, the grandest and most imposing stage of modern times. I have endeavored to reduce music to its proper function, that of seconding poetry by enforcing the expression of sentiment and the interest of the situation, without interrupting the action or weakening it by superfluous ornament. My idea is that the relation of music to poetry is much the same as that of harmonious coloring and well disposed light and shade to an accurate drawing, which animate the figures without altering their outlines. I have therefore been very careful never to interrupt a singer in the heat of a dialogue in order to introduce a tedious ritornelle, nor to stop

him in the middle of a piece either for the purpose of displaying the flexibility of his voice on some favorite vowel, or that the orchestra may give him time to take breath before a long, sustained note. Furthermore, I have not thought it right to hurry through the second part of a song if the words happened to be the most important part of the whole, in order to repeat the first part regularly four times; or to finish the air where the sense is complete in order to allow the singer to exhibit his power of varying the passage at pleasure.....

"My idea is that the overture should indicate the subject and prepare the spectators for the character of what they are about to see; that the instruments ought to be introduced in proportion to the degree of interest and passion in the words; that it is necessary, above all, to avoid making too great a disparity between the recitative and the air of a dialogue, in order not to break the sense of a period or awkwardly interrupt the movement and animation of a scene. I have also felt that my chief endeavor should be to attain a grand

simplicity, and consequently I have avoided making a parade of difficulties at the cost of clearness....In fact, there is no rule I have not felt bound to sacrifice for the sake of effect."

Gluck was a great influence in his day, being a man of strength of character, and having the courage of his convictions. While much of his work was not favorably received at first, it roused people to the incongruity and absurdity of the existing Italian opera, so that it never again sunk to so low a level as that which it had occupied before.

Mozart, who follows Gluck, was not a reformer, and looked at opera as a musician, not as a dramatist. His operas are beautifully melodious, and while he was not particularly dramatic, he had, in addition to his melodic gift, a happy one of characterization, so that his characters are musically well portrayed. Unfortunately, he was rather indifferent about the texts he accepted, most of his operas being written to poor Italian texts. The "Magic Flute" is his only important German opera. His work has a certain German solidity

and did a great deal toward developing a German national school.

Beethoven's "Fidelio" is important because, while not popular, it was written in German, in the German style. The story shows Beethoven's ideals somewhat, being one of wifely devotion instead of the usual tale of vulgar intrigue.

There are a number of Italians who did their opera work in France and Germany. Among these were Salieri, Cherubini, Spontini and Rossini, of whom the last named is the most important.

Rossini's first successful opera was "Tancred," given in 1813. He had a ready, melodious gift, and wrote rapidly and voluminously. His operas revert to the florid Italian style except in the case of "William Tell," which is restrained and dramatic.

The Italian composers who followed Rossini tried to give more consideration to dramatic truth than he had done. Bellini and Donizetti were neither of them particularly dramatic writers, however, and their operas, "Norma" and "Lucia," for example, are popular for their melodiousness.

Verdi was a man of different gifts. He lived for a long time so that he felt the influence of a good many changes in the musical development. His work falls into three periods: first, that of his early operas, "Ernani" and "I Lombardi," in imitation of Rossini; second, that of "Rigoletto" and "Il Trovatore," in which dramatic effect was much more considered; and finally, the change in his advanced age to the most modern style, in "Othello" and "Falstaff." These two last operas show the ideals and principles of Gluck and of Wagner, who had a profound influence on Verdi's later work.

In France, opera was early divided into two styles--opera comique, and grand opera, the distinction being that in opera comique there was spoken dialogue, while in grand opera there was none. Furthermore, grand opera was usually reserved for a serious, big subject, while opera comique treated lighter, more humorous ones. This latter distinction did not always hold true, however.

Opera comique is an outgrowth of French admiration

for opera buffa. Gretry and Mehul are pioneers in this style. Mehul's work is serious, but the typical opera comique is characterized by humor, grace, lightness and great smoothness of finish, and perfection of form, with sufficient attention to the play itself. Boieldien's "Jean de Paris" and "La Dame Blanche" are said to lay the foundation for this typical opera comique. Auber is a composer who should be noted here. His best known opera is "Fra Diavolo." Herold and Adam should also be considered.

The opera comique was much more distinctly national than grand opera, for it was not influenced by the florid Italian style; and its service consisted in keeping alive the dramatic ideal, which in spite of Gluck's efforts was being lost sight of. Grand opera, bound by tradition, had to consist of five acts, made up of a string of arias and recitatives and choruses, with a ballet in the second and in the fourth acts.

Auber's "Masaniello," produced in 1828, marks the beginning of the modern historical opera, and is musically and dramatically in a similar spirit with "William Tell."

Giacomo Meyerbeer, while not a Frenchman by birth, became French by adoption, and became for a while the dominating personality in all opera. His "Robert the Devil" created a great sensation. He had a receptive faculty, and combined the showy parts of French, Italian and German opera styles. While he wrote other operas, "The Huguenots" seems to be the one destined to live.

Meyerbeer has been accused of being over-sensational, but he should be given the credit for giving new life to opera," for putting living, palpitating beings upon the stage, instead of the cold abstractions of mythology and antiquity." He was a master of dramatic and orchestral effects.

Toward the close of the eighteenth century the revolutionary spirit and the restlessness corresponding to it in literary fields began to make themselves felt in music. The romantic movement in literature transferred itself to opera, being manifested in an interest in folk lore, the supernatural and legends of chivalry. "The action paid no regard to the unities of time and

place....The music, instead of being governed by restraints of definite forms, adapted itself to the varying exigencies of the drama. The sharp distinction between the recitative and aria was softened by the introduction of the 'scena,' a peculiarly effective blending of the features of both; the overture became an integral part of the whole by the use of themes associated with leading dramatic situations. The orchestra....became, so to speak, one of the Dramatis Personae and vied with the singers in indicating psychological and dramatic crises. This was largely due to...the development of novel and original combinations of instruments to produce varying and impressive shades of tone color.....Carl Maria von Weber was the first to utilize the individual timbres of orchestral instruments to secure effects of a  
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weird, unearthly character."

Weber is considered the founder of romantic opera. "Der Freischuetz," produced in 1821, was immediately

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1. Baltzell, "History of Music."

successful. The use of a legend, familiar to the people, its fresh music and its national spirit, made a profound popular appeal, though critics and musicians were slow to accept it. The introduction of the supernatural and the folk material seemed to them lacking in dignity.

But Weber had begun a new era. His second opera, "Euryanthe," is a direct forerunner of Wagner's "Lohengrin." Both operas make use of the supernatural element, both make use of the leading motive, both employ legendary material; and the stories of "Euryanthe" and "Lohengrin" are somewhat similar. "Euryanthe" is set to music throughout, the dialogue being in accompanied recitative. This was an innovation and in "Oberon," somewhat against his will, Weber returned to his old manner--that of using some spoken dialogue.

The value of the influence of the romantic opera not only upon subsequent opera, but upon absolute music also, can hardly be overestimated. It proved the value of using all the musical resources in the expression

of emotion, and the influence is still being felt.

Weber was the first composer to make use of the leading motif. It was also his idea to embody the themes which were to appear later in the overture, thus making it a sort of synopsis of the opera, and preparing the hearers for what was to follow. This, it will be remembered, was Gluck's idea of what should be done.

Richard Wagner, while destined to found a new school, wrote his first important opera, "Rienzi," in imitation of Meyerbeer. All sorts of stage effects were employed, and the music was showy, noisy and brilliant. This opera, produced in Dresden in 1842, was a great success as far as popular favor goes. Wagner's next opera, "The Flying Dutchman," was a totally different sort, conceived primarily as a drama; and while it was not well received, he persisted in writing music-dramas, as he called them, one after another, showing the growth of his ideas.

Wagner's theory of music-drama was as follows: mythological and legendary subjects are the only suit-

able material for music-drama; the composer should write his own texts; everything should yield to dramatic truth. One art is insufficient to express the deepest emotions, so in the music-drama there should be a combination of all arts--the music, the poetry, the artist's and architect's work in the scenery, and sculpture in the actor's poses.

The part of the Greek chorus in explaining the play Wagner transferred to the orchestra. This was done by means of the leading motifs--characteristic themes associated with each of the persons in the drama, important properties or ideas. With "Lohengrin" Wagner abandoned fixed forms, substituting preludes for the formal overture, and making use of what he called unending melody--a continuous flow of tone between voices and orchestra.

Wagner's influence has been deep and wide, no composer since his day having failed to feel it. Nothing really new has been done since Wagner in the development of the music-drama.

Strauss in Germany, Gounod and Bizet in France,

and especially Verdi in Italy, were profoundly influenced by Wagner.

The present Italian school, represented by Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Puccini, tends toward a brutal realism in opera, choosing to present the problems of every day life.

Puccini is the most artistic of the present Italian school, and does not use what seems to many the really ugly effects of Richard Strauss or other moderns. He has been attracted by American subjects, "Madam Butterfly" and "The Girl of the Golden West" both being taken from our country.

In France the spirit of the modern school is much the same as in Italy. Here, however, we have the only new phase since Wagner in the work of Debussy, Massenet and Carpentier, especially of Debussy. This consists in a striving for "atmosphere," the effect of a mood; and "Pelleas and Meselinde" seems to many to be almost entirely without form.

Carpentier's "Louise" created a sensation when it first came out. It goes to extremes in realism,

and is a picture of low Parisian life.

The brutal realism of Strauss in "Salome" and "Elektra" is offensive to a great many, but by some Strauss is regarded as the strongest German composer today.

Of comparatively recent date in England are the light operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. The collaboration of these two men was particularly fortunate, and their operas are delightfully entertaining.

In any survey of the history of opera, it will become apparent that it consists of almost continuous changing from one to the other of its phases--from emphasis on dramatic truth to undue prominence to the lyrical side. This is, of course, on account of the dual nature of opera--the presence of both musical and dramatic elements.

## Part 2

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The history of opera in America begins with the introduction in New York of Gay's "Beggar's Opera." This was a typical ballad opera, in English form, in which the words were set to popular tunes, or at least to music adapted to the purpose, but already familiar to the people. This "Beggar's Opera" was first given in America in 1750, and from that time for nearly three quarters of a century opera was produced only by English singers and actors. It became the fashion for foreign operas to be rearranged and given in English, and in this way adaptations of many of the European operas were given in New York.

With the arrival in New York of Manuel Garcia and his opera company begins the period of Italian dominance in America. Garcia's first opera in New York was Rossini's "Barber of Seville," and although at first people seemed very much interested in this and subsequent productions, in course of time it became

evident that the venture was not a financial success. Interest flagged a good deal because people could not understand the Italian texts. But Garcia's enterprise had the effect of giving America Italian opera--an effect which lasted for about sixty years. The history of Italian opera in New York is the history of one failure after another. Opera houses were built, only to be closed eventually. Then other opera houses would be built, to meet the same financial fate.

In Milwaukee, German operas were given by local musical societies with considerable success about 1860, or a little before that time. Italian opera had failed so in New York that managers were afraid to undertake it any more. The singers demanded fabulous salaries, and the cost of production was so enormous that nearly all opera seasons were attended by great loss. But at last Leopold Damrosch suggested replacing Italian opera with German. He got together a company which was good and strong, but without any very famous stars. Attention was given to getting a good ensemble, and the scheme proved popular. At first

the lighter German operas were given, but finally even Wagner's works were produced with success.

Today New York supports two permanent opera companies, the Metropolitan and the Manhattan. New Orleans is another American city which supports a resident opera company. Chicago is an important musical center now supporting a resident company also, as does Philadelphia. It seems likely that many others will be doing as these cities before very many years.

New Orleans was the first home of French opera in America. In 1791 a company of comedians settled in New Orleans and gave entertainments there for twenty years. In 1813 John Davis built the Theatre d'Orleans, where opera was given three nights each week. This theatre was burned but a new one, much better than the former one, was built, and here many French artists of renown would come to sing. In 1842 the New Orleans company made a successful tour.

Of course, most of our American cities enjoy annual performances of opera, and they seem popular. But nevertheless it has been generally a financial

failure, due largely to the tremendous cost of production; and just as much to public caprice and lack of real appreciation.

The star system has had a bad influence on good opera at moderate prices, but people seem to prefer hearing an indifferent performance and one star to hearing opera well given throughout, without any very famous singer.

It seems, too, as if opera in America should be given in English. Other countries refuse to tolerate opera in a tongue they do not understand, and there is no doubt that it would be more popular if it were understood by opera goers.

The success of Henry Savage's English company would indicate that this is true. He has done a very important work in producing the great operas in English translations. His first season was opened in Boston in 1895, and since that time has given performances in most of the large cities very successfully artistically and financially. Another good thing Savage has done has been to place emphasis on a good

ensemble rather than on an individual star.

Opera in American and American opera are very different things. There is a good deal of the former, but almost nothing of the latter, worthy of the name. Various prizes have been offered for operas by American composers on American subjects, but so far, with the possible exception of Victor Herbert's "Natoma," nothing worth while has been written. American composers seem to prefer mythological subjects as Converse's "Pipe of Desire" or Nevin's "Poia"; or remote subjects such as Parker's "Mona" or De Koven's "Robin Hood." The American subjects seem to have appealed to the foreign musician rather than to the native, for Puccini has given us an American picture in "The Girl of The Golden West," and his "Madam Butterfly" is based upon an American novel. Puccini is now at work upon "Rip van Winkle."

Victor Herbert's "Natoma," mentioned before, is a really serious venture into grand opera, and the fact that it met with success is encouraging, and a hopeful sign for the future. The story is that of the

idealized, conventional Indian girl, in love with an American lieutenant. The scene is laid in California and the time is 1820, under Spanish regime.

There is much good music in "Natoma." Some effort is made to use the leading motive, and there is an attempt at reproducing the Indian spirit in the music. One of the best things in the opera is the "dagger dance" in the second act.

While some argue that the national American opera cannot, or should not, be built upon Indian stories and legends because we as a people are not of that race, still it must be admitted that the Indian has had a great deal to do with the shaping of our great nation, and with our internal history, making us what we are. And at least, "Natoma" is a definite step in the direction of a distinctly American opera.

Then there are those who argue that American music will never be distinct from the best European music, just as our culture is a reflex of that of Europe. They contend that we are made up of so many different races that a distinct national art can never be developed.

Perhaps this is true, and yet we have managed to assimilate a vast number of foreigners, and in the course of two generations, almost, to make loyal, patriotic citizens out of them, of a type that will hardly be mistaken anywhere for any but American. And if we can in this short time begin to have a typical American citizen, as it is claimed we have, we surely can develop a national style of music.

It has been, and doubtless will continue to be, a very slow process, but a process which would be greatly hastened if an American Wagner should arise. It would seem as though our country affords plenty of inspiration for the opera composer. There are stirring events in our history, romantic themes to be taken, especially from the earliest period; and why could not New York City afford as much inspiration as Paris for an American "Louise?"

It is true that we lack the legendary material that has been the basis of much of the best European opera, and our history is hardly remote enough yet to be veiled in romance. For instance, the idealized

Indian--the "noble redskin"--is almost ridiculous to those of us who have spent our lives near the Indian reservations; but when the race has died out, and there is no one left to remember how far from attractive they really are, a really poetic opera subject could be found about them which would not, it may be, be any farther from the truth than the romantic tales of chivalry.

And so it may be that, in years to come, some of the events of our Civil War, softened by time, will fire the imagination of one of our musicians, and he will weave these incidents into the plot of the "great American opera."

No doubt we have been lagging in art, but it must be remembered that our country is comparatively new, and we have had an enormous amount of work to do in order to make it support us. We must feed, house and clothe our families before we think about giving the children music lessons; and so it has been in our national life. We have been so busy building cities, cultivating our fields and adjusting our governmental affairs that art of all kinds has been put aside until the really necessary things have been done.

Musical culture in the United States is growing rapidly, and this must continue if we acquire a genuine musical atmosphere. Possibly the time will never come when our small boys will do as it is said the little Italian boys do. They gather in the barn and give performances of opera just as our lads get together in some vacant lot for a game of baseball. But until some such national interest in opera is developed as exists here for baseball, the American opera composer is going to have up hill work for recognition.

However, owing to our cosmopolitan makeup, when the great American opera is written, it should be one of the world's best, because the American composer "will be the truest representative of a universal art, because he will be the truest type of the citizen  
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of the world."

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1. Krehbiel, "Famous Composers and Their Works,"  
"American Music."