

## MR. W. S. LYSTER AND OPERA IN VICTORIA.

### No. I.

The approaching departure of Mr. W. S. Lyster and the consequent "break-up" of operatic business are matters of no small interest to a large portion of our community. Mr. Lyster has for so long a time identified himself with the colony that to a great extent sketch of his doings is a history of opera in Victoria. With a view of permanently recording our sense of his claims to consideration from the music-loving public of the colony, and of recalling to our readers many pleasant hours, we purpose giving an outline of operatic performances under Mr. Lyster's management.

On March 9, 1861, the Lyster Opera Company first appeared in Melbourne. The principals were Madame Escott, Miss Rosalie Durand, Miss Georgia Hodson, Mrs. Ada King, Mr. Squires, Mr. Fred. Lyster, Mr. Trevor, and Mr. Farquharson, who joined the company on its arrival. Mr. A. Reiff, a talented musician, was the conductor. The orchestra included all our best players, Herr Strebinger, principal violin, Herr Siede, the flautist, and others who are now with us. On the opening night "Lucia" was given, Madame Escott, the heroine, from her first appearance winning a place in public favour which years only served to increase. During this season Auber's "Crown Diamonds" was the only opera which had not been previously attempted in Melbourne, but in orchestra, chorus, and general effect Mr. Lyster's management left former efforts far behind. "Fra Diavolo," "Maritana," "Lurline," "La Traviata," "Lucrezia Borgia" (Madame Escott's great triumph), "La Sonnambula," and lastly "The Bohemian Girl," in which Mr. Squires charmed every one, closed the first season of thirty-six nights.

On June 17 the company re-appeared, commencing with "The Bohemian Girl," in addition to the operas enumerated, "La Favorita," "Il Trovatore," "Ermani," "Der Freischütz," and "Norma" were given, Miss Octavia Hamilton taking the part of Adalgisa. The company was further strengthened by the addition of Signor and Signora Bianchi and Signor Grossi. Rossini's "Cinderella" was produced for the first time in Australia, and an opera by a musician then resident with us, "The Gentleman in Black" (by S. H. Marsh), was introduced to the Melbourne public. So great was the appreciation of Mr.

public. So great was the appreciation of Mr. Lyster's efforts in this season, that on July 27—the 36th night—amateur and professional musicians joined, and the orchestra being too small, they played Weber's magnificent overture to "Der Freischütz" on the stage, as a special compliment to the manager on his first benefit night.

The third season began September 23, and was marked by the first production in Australia of Mozart's "Don Giovanni," October 21. This masterpiece was received with the greatest enthusiasm, the company threw themselves heartily into their work, the orchestra seemed to revel in playing such music. In addition, Donizetti's "Linda di Chamouni," with the never-to-be-forgotten duet "Ah consolarmi" for Madame Escott and Mr. Squires, and Flotow's "Martha" were given for the first time. The season closed on November 9 with the 108th performance in the year.

In 1862, February 17, a fourth season of 46 nights commenced, the special novelty being Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro;" Verdi's "Rigoletto," and Balfe's "Rose of Castile," were first performed, and "Lurline" was revived with extra magnificence. Easter Monday, April 21, inaugurated the fifth season, the specialty being the production of "Satanella," Miss Durand as Stella, and a very bewitching one too. This season is memorable as witnessing one of the greatest triumphs achieved here by any artist, the performance of Azucena by Madame Escott. The season closed after 18 performances. Then followed three concerts of great merit, given jointly by the Lyster company and the Musical Union—a society conducted by the late G. R. G. Pringle. From May 24 to June 21 the Theatre Royal was converted into a concert-hall, the Lyster company being the singers, in a series of monster promenade concerts *à la Jullien*.

The sixth season began on October 14, when Mr. Wharton made his first appearance in "La Favorita." The "stock" operas were repeated, while rehearsal time was mainly devoted to the preparation of Meyerbeer's historic opera, "Les Huguenots." On November 16, in a house crowded to excess, the grand Lutheran chorale fell on the ears and rivetted the attention of an audience whose expectations had been raised to the highest point. The success of the opera was unequivocal, every one concerned exerted his or her best powers, and the result has never since been surpassed, if equalled. Who of the many who

equalled. Who of the many who thronged "the Royal" during the twenty-two nights of its performance will ever forget the impassioned acting and glorious singing of Madame Escott and Mr. Squires in the fourth act, the dignity of Mr. Wharton's "St. Bris," the grand fire of Mr. Farquharson's "Marcel," the coquettishness of Marguerite, the graceful appearance of Urbain—who will forget the "Cathedral" scene, with the wonderful *cello* accompaniment, the thrilling excitement of the "Benediction of the Poniards," the beautiful "Vision trio." The enthusiasm was unbounded, and warmest praises were freely given to the enterprising manager, to his talented conductor, and to the accomplished musician (Herr Siede) by whom the work was specially "scored." The season closed with the sixtieth performance, on December 20. From December 26 to January 13, the company gave opera with pantomime following, and on January 19 commenced a season of 12 nights with Rooke's "Amilie," or "The Love Test." At this time Mr. Schott, the famous oboe player, arrived in the colony, and played for the first time on January 20.

In May, 1863, Mr. Lyster returned to Melbourne, and began an eighth season at the Haymarket Theatre, with Mr. George Loder as conductor. The opening attraction was Gounod's "Faust." On its first performance in London "Faust" was a failure, but the verdict which condemned it has been long since set aside. Here the opera was warmly received, and had a run of seven nights. The second novelty was Rossini's "Barber of Seville." This season is noteworthy as that in which Mr. Beaumont first appeared on a Melbourne stage. He made his *début* as Tonio in "The Daughter of the Regiment," and on June 15 played Jonas in the first representation of "Le Prophète." Meyerbeer's work was produced with great care and every liberal appointment available, ending a brilliant season of 48 nights.

After nine months' absence from the colony the Lyster Company appeared at the Royal on March 13, 1865. Mr. Loder was again the conductor. No new work was attempted, but favourite operas by Mozart, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Gounod, and Verdi followed in rapid succession through a season of 18 nights. The tenth season of 35 performances began in August. The opening opera was "Faust," "L'Elisir d'Amore" and "Masanello" were the new works. The latter

ad great favour. Miss Hodson was a charming Fenella. Miss Emma Neville sang "Arline" in "The Bohemian Girl," and Mr. Beaumont took the part of Almaviva in "The Barber" for the first time during this season. Boxing Night, 1865, was selected for the production of Weber's "Oberon," which was placed upon the stage with a completeness and magnificence unprecedented in colonial annals. For 12 nights crowded houses assembled to listen to the delightful music and to witness the gorgeous display. On January 6 Mr. Albert Richardson, who had returned from studying in Italy, appeared as the Count in "Il Trovatore." Later Rossini's "Semiramide" was produced for the first time. After seven nights' run it was replaced by "Le Prophète." "I Puritani" was also revived during the 34 performances.

In June, 1866, Herr Siede became the con-

ductor of the company, whose twelfth season opened June 11, with Mr. Sutcliffe, a baritone, and Mr. John de Haga, basso profundo, announced as new members. The former appeared as Valentine in "Faust," the latter in "The Bohemian Girl." His solo, "The heart bowed down," was loudly re-demanded, the encore being as much for the clarinet obligato as for the song. The same night Mr. Beaumont astonished the audience by his delivery of "When other lips" and "The Fair Land of Poland." At this time the company was materially strengthened by the addition of Madame Simonsen, who sang Lucia on the 25th and Amina on the 27th June with great success, establishing the position she still holds. So far old favourite operas had been given. It was known that a special treat was in store, and on Monday, July 9, Meyerbeer's work, "L'Africaine," was produced. The resources of the company were taxed to the uttermost to do justice to the great composer's latest effort. The orchestra was particularly good, and the charms of the music were heightened by the attraction of a double set of principals, Mesdames Escott and Simonsen alternating in the part of Selika, Mesdames Stuttaford and Durand in that of Inez, and Messrs. Squires and Beaumont in that of Vasco di Gama. So acknowledged was the pre-eminence of Madame Escott in public favour that before the second set of singers had been heard, the arrangement was slightly commented upon as giving "off nights" to relieve the *prima donna*, and great was the surprise when on the second performance it

surprise when on the second performance it was found that Madame Simonsen was a most delightful Selika, while the Vasco di Gama of Mr. Beaumont was proved to be superior to that of Mr. Squires. The triumph of our Australian tenor was thorough and legitimate. He had worked steadily for years—at first with scant encouragement; but his performance of Vasco attested his right to the lead which he has ever since so worthily sustained. In this year Madame Simonsen appeared as Marguerite in "The Huguenots," winning laurels by her charming vocalisation. The season of 43 performances closed August 1.

In the thirteenth season, commencing October 2, Herr Siede and Mr. Simonsen divided the onerous duties of conductor. "L'Africaine" was revived, "Le Nozze di Figaro" was given after three years' rest, and on October 29 "Roberto il Diavolo" was first performed. This, the earliest of Meyerbeer's great operas in no way suffered by comparison with his latest work. It was splendidly "mounted." The revival of "The Huguenots" shortly afterwards gave opportunity for comparing and contrasting the three principal compositions of the great German musician. On November 23, Madame Escott's farewell benefit was announced. This great artist had been for nearly six years the bright particular star of the company. As actress and singer combined she has had few rivals. Her severance from the Lyster company was felt as a public loss. The enthusiastic audience looked upon her as a friend. The entertainment was the 517th performance of the company, and it was generally supposed to be the final one. The plans of the *entrepreneur* were entirely changed by the accident which befel Mr. Beaumont early in 1867. Mr. Lyster decided to remain in Melbourne until the sufferer was out of danger. He collected his scattered forces, and under the able *bâton* of Herr Siede, a season was arranged at the Princess's Theatre. The members of the company, indeed the musicians of Victoria, had assembled on May 1 for a grand benefit concert for Mr. Beaumont, at which singers and players vied with each other in testifying their sympathy. The opera season began May 5. The stock works of the company's *repertoire* occupied the members during the first four weeks. "Roberto" was given in Italian; the "Huguenots" was revived, Madame Simonsen singing partly French and partly English, and Mr. F. Lyster assuming the character of St. Bris. "L'Africaine" was performed on June 1, and on June 8 Auber's

the character of St. Bris. "L'Africaine" was performed on June 1, and on June 8 Auber's "Gustavus III." was given for the first time in Australia. The music pleased every one; the chorus was particularly good; the scenery and arrangements, particularly the ballroom in Stockholm, were all that could be desired. The piece had a good run, and had it been a little earlier, might have beneficially aided the financial results of the season. Mr. Lyster, on the closing night, June 22nd, referred to the forced change in his movements which had enabled him to give the extra season of 30 nights, and added that possibly "still another" might follow. The hint was carried out in November. On the 21st "Roberto" was performed, Miss Geraldine Warden making a favourable impression as Queen Isabella. The opera was excellently mounted. The 2nd of December was a memorable day. Mr. Beaumont appeared for the first time since his great calamity, as Vasco, and received the warmest of hearty welcomes. After December 3, the company left the Princess's Theatre, and moved to the Royal, where, on December 9, Rossini's "William Tell" was put upon the stage. The band was increased, the chorus enlarged and supplemented by the powerful help of the male members of the Orpheus Union, the scenery was good, the performance excellent, and the orchestra never did better service. Mr. Beaumont was Arnold. A long "run" was predicted, and hopes expressed that the support of the public would reward the efforts of the management. The "farewell benefit" of Mr. Squires on December 21 closed the season, which Mr. Lyster openly stated had not been "financially" what he could have wished.

In January, 1868, a quartette of Italian artists who came here from South America was engaged by Mr. Lyster. The Haymarket Theatre was secured, and on January 6 Italian opera in its integrity was performed on a Melbourne stage. Mr. F. Lyster was the conductor. The artists were Signora Vitali, Signori Devoti, Bertolini, and De Antoni, who possessed a magnificent voice—basso profundo—of the true Lablache type. The new prima donna failed to make a permanently favourable impression, but despite all shortcomings the season recorded genuine successes. "I Due Foscari" was produced for the first time, and also "Un Ballo in Maschera," in which the Italians and the Lyster company proper, with Madame Escott and Mr. Squires re-engaged, took part. Verdi's "Rigoletto" was performed for eight nights. "Ricardo" was

and Mr. Squires re-engaged, took part. Verdi's "Ballo" ran for eight nights. "Ricardo" was the most successful character in Devoti's rôle. Miss Geraldine Warden was first the page, but owing to Madame Escott's illness she was promoted, and successfully essayed the part of Adelia. Most memorable in this season was the revival of "Il Barbiere di Siviglia." The "La Calumnia" of De Antoni and the "Largo al factotum" of Bertolini were truly artistic efforts. "Trovatore," "Ernani," "Norma"—De Antoni a superb Oroveso—"La Figlia del Reggimento," and other operas more or less familiar, were brought out. The entertainment was good, but no the support; and on February 17, Mr. Lyster, speaking from the stage, expressed his regret that the limited share of patronage bestowed upon the opera company had made the profits of the Italians very small. De Antoni's benefit had given him the paltry sum of £26. He announced that a special benefit would be given to the Italian artists on February 21. Fortunately for the credit of music-loving Melbourne, a crowded house assembled. Afterwards the quartette sailed for California. This was the 619th performance under Mr. Lyster's management.

In February, 1870, Messrs. Lyster and Smith announced an opera season, the attractions in addition to the English company being the engagement of Signora Barratti, Miss Lucy Chambers, Signori Neri, Contini, and Dondi. Herr Siede resumed his post as conductor. The opening opera was "Ernani." The new artists were heartily welcomed. Mr. Lyster publicly expressed his thanks to Miss Chambers for many kindnesses in connexion with his negotiations in Italy. On the 14th February, Miss L. Chambers, whose reputation as an amateur had been considerable, first appeared on

the stage as Maffeo Orsini. High encomiums were lavished on the stalwart-looking friend of Gennaro, the voice being compared to that of Sara Flower in her prime. The lady appeared as Azucena in "Trovatore" and Ulrica, in "Un Ballo," both representations meeting with much favour from the audience. After nearly four weeks' devotion to Verdi "Norma" was announced. The music of the Druid priestess was eminently suited to Signora Barratti, and the interpretation gave her a prominent place in the rank of lyric artists. Signor Dondi during this season made rapid progress in public favour. On March 12 the English

portion of the company gave Balfe's "Bohemian Girl," Mr. Beaumont appearing for the first time since his return from California. He was in fine voice, and sang with marked success in various operas. April 4 was set apart for the benefit of Miss Lucy Chambers. April 8 closed the season of 50 nights. July 4 inaugurated a winter campaign of 54 nights. The opening opera was "Trovatore." The artists were in fine voice. Definite improvement was noticeable in some members of the company. Fletow's "Martha" was given in Italian, Miss Lucy Chambers taking the part of Nancy, Mr. Beaumont Lionel. "Un Ballo," "Maritana," "Faust," "Ernani," "Il Barbiere," in which Signor Dondi achieved a new triumph, and on July 14 "I Vespri Siciliani" was produced for the first time. Petrella's classic opera "Ione," or the "Last Days of Pompeii," produced August 1, was the second novelty. Both works were much admired, and were placed upon the stage in magnificent style. August 15 witnessed the revival of the "Huguenots," Signor Dondi as Marcel, Mr. Farley as St. Bris. "L'Africaine" and "Masaniello" were also repeated. The season closed September 11. The Town-hall festivities seriously affected the finances. Musically the season was commendable. Three special performances were given in October, and on "Boxing night" a season of 24 nights was opened with the production of Verdi's "Attila," conducted by Herr Siede. The dresses and "mounting" were brilliant. Signora Barratti was so effectually disguised that until her voice was heard she was not recognised. "Martha," "Roberto," and "Lucrezia" having been given, the "Rose of Castile" was revived, after five years' rest, Miss Chambers as Donna Carmen produced a most favourable impression. "Norma," "Maritana," "William Tell," and "Faust" followed, and on January 23, 1871, "Gli Ugonotti." The season closed on February 4, Mr. Lyster announcing the engagement of a new company of Italians for his next season in March.