

One Day in a Jazz Factory

BY WALTER A. DAVENPORT.

"For example," said the song plugger, "I wouldn't bat an eye if they handed me a sprightly arrangement of Isolden's Liebestod, Isolden's love death song, you know, and told me to put it over. That would probably be the last, last straw, but I've tried it with 'The Evening Star,' from 'Tannhauser,' and 'Vissi d'Arte e d'Amor,' from 'Tosca,' and 'Un Bel di Vedremo,' from 'Madame Butterfly.' You know, 'Some Day He'll Come.' Of course the dance orchestras do it better because you can cover up with saxophones what the voice refuses to handle."

"No, I wouldn't be at all surprised if, at this minute, one of those (at least one) Jazz-beaux and Jazz-belles in the reception room there had a manuscript of a fox trot constructed from Richard Strauss' Morgen or Bach's air, for the G string."

"Oh, Lord, it isn't how can they do it, but how do they do it? And, believe me, you can't tell them they've emulated old man Homer and went and took what they might require. No chance! Tell one of those malpractitioners that they have perpetrated a dirty trick on Wagner, Bizet, Dvorak, Grieg, Tschalkowsky, Goldmark, Mendelssohn, Beethoven or Offenbach and—well, come over here and I'll introduce you to a girl who has been in every song publishing house in New York trying to sell a snappy reconstruction of the Intermezzo from Wolf-Ferrari's 'Jewels of the Madonna.'"

"All she's doing is waving the bloody shirt in the face of the Ricardis. It might be all right if she'd give credit to Wolf-Ferrari and confess on the title page that she has taken certain artistic liberties in handling his stuff. That is, it would be all right if her manipulation of Hermann's best stuff was clever. But no—but come over and meet her."

The writer hereof was presented to a cold blonde. She gave one the impression of having been carved from a tinted wax taper. Six or eight gold teeth challenged her hair.

"It's the same story all over the city," said she. "It isn't a question of what you've done or what you've created. Oh, no. It is who you are. I'm an artist with eight years of stage experience. I know what the discriminating public wants but do you think that I can get my stuff across? Would you like to hear 'Cammerista,' as I have called this piece? Given a chance it is going to knock them stiffer than Dardanella did."

Nearby a piano was being assaulted by a middle-aged lady who seemed to have recently been lacquered. A smallish, pert-looking person, she was, and she was playing for her own benefit a much-corrected score that needed dry cleaning or something.

"Dearie," purred the blond composer of the new Dardanella, "would you mind letting me play for the gentleman, being that your lovely piece doesn't seem to have much of an audience?"

"Your own stuff?" queried the lacquered lady.

"To be sure, dearie."

A Clash of Temperament.
"Awfully sorry, darling," refused the owner of the dilapidated masterpiece, "but you're interrupting me. Besides, don't you think that pieces that are going to be heard in public should be given the preference?"

Rather skillfully we maneuvered the blonde out of range and, presently, we found another piano which we possessed by dint of a measure of rough stuff. The unrecognized genius proceeded to play two-thirds of Wolf-Ferrari's helter-skelter dance and filled in the remaining third with a chorus of her very own. It was like topping off a dainty luncheon with a dose of boiled parsnips.

"Like it?" smiled the blonde.
"That chorus stands out from the rest of the piece like the Woolworth tower," we assured her. "Are you going to give Wolf-Ferrari any credit on the title page?"

"Who?"
"The Wolf-Ferrari."
"The gent who wrote 'The Jewels of the Madonna'?"

"Yes."
"Why, I never thought of that. Now, that you mention it, there is a suggestion of his stuff in this, ain't there?"

And then, after solemn reflection:
"No, I don't see that I owe Mr. Wolf-Ferrari anything. I didn't steal his stuff. I never noticed the similarity between our pieces until this minute. Isn't that just like us composers? We are all striving for beauty and, naturally, there are some of us who will have similar inspirations. But, as I say, it takes a drag to get your stuff across and, if they insist that I give Wolf-Ferrari credit for having had the same theme as I have here, I'm willing. Some of the best of us have had to make concessions until the public knows us. After that there's nothing to it. There's one thing you can't do and that's fool the music-loving public. Not even music publishers can do that. I'll have 'em pleading with me before long."

"Sure thing," we agreed as we edged off.
"Maybe I would be fairer to explain that she's an extreme case," said the song plugger, who, by the way, used to cherish vast ambitions and had a good baritone foundation for his hopes. But there are thousands like him. Good voices and much praise in Seneca Falls, Camden, Greenville, Fargo, Sioux City and so on. Sensations in the First Presbyterian church choir back home, years of saving and then a New York singing coach, only to be convinced after all the money is spent that vaudeville or small voices in the musical comedies must suffice. This lad went through all that. Fortunately he has a great deal of personality and he is something of a genius at plugging songs. Of course, there are many who were born song pluggers and who never aspired beyond.

"Yes," he repeated, "maybe she is an extreme case, although I don't know. We have men and women coming in here to sell stuff that makes you admire their nerve, at least. You see, the great majority of them have had some rudimentary music training. You've become more or less familiar with the more popular of what they call the classical pieces. The queer thing about them is that they seem to think that they, individually, are the only persons in the city familiar with these old stand-bys. For instance, they used to come in here with the anvil chorus, the tressor song and the 'Miserere' until they got tired of hearing each other insist that it was original stuff."

"Now they seem to have broadened out. Maybe the phonographs are to blame for this additional familiarity. Nowadays we hear 'I Puritani,' 'Le Prophete,' 'Parsifal,' 'Natale,' 'Figaro,' 'I Lombardi,' 'The Juggler of Notre Dame,' 'Gottterdammerung' and all the erstwhile less familiar and, consequently, there are all the more arias to reconstruct."

What has been recounted, it seems only fair to explain, took place in the offices of a firm of song publishers. The head of the firm is an extraordinarily gifted man, whose sense of rhythm has made him famous. About these offices there was much to remind one of the average newspaper editorial rooms. There was the same haphazardness about them and the same undercurrent of efficient routine.

These offices of this music publishing firm radiated irregularly from an oversize hub of reception room. In this reception room were 50 men and women. There were vaudeville persons seeking new songs, and everyone of these ladies and gentlemen was insisting that the composer had not appeared who had the genius to write a song of sufficient brilliance and originality adequately to show off the yearning artist's complete personality.

"Gimme a song and I'll make the public forget Irene Franklin, Bert Williams, Nora Bayes, Eva Tanguay, Ruth Royce and the rest of them," they moan. "But will they gimme a song? Not a chance! Not a chance!"

The Shrinking Violets.

In that reception-room crowd there were unsung composers. And, oh, for the assurance and self-confidence of these unsung ladies and gentlemen. Why, there are unread authors who would joyously sign away their rights to ten years of life for a little shred of the interdict of these strugglers after fame and fortune! Did they advance upon the editor with diffidence, hoping, hoping, hoping that he would see in their stuff the merit its creator or assembler sees? Or did they come fearfully forward like Montaigne, saying:

"I have here only made a nosegay of culled flowers and have brought nothing of my own but the thread that ties them together?"

They did not! Who the devil ever



Classics of all ages are being murdered by would-be composers.

heard of Montaigne anyway? Well, who the devil would suspect a guy who talked like that to ever amount to anything? Steal from Verdi, Gounod, Elgar, Auber, Puccini, McDowell, Nevin, Massenet, Donizetti, Herbert, Darnowski, Meyerbeer, Bellini, Chaminade, Paderewski? G'wan!

Milling around with these positive young (and some not so young) writers of superlative jazz were half a dozen fellows whose jobs place them in a half-way category between the out-and-out song plugger and the in-and-in scout. Their duty it is to separate the sheep from the goats, although by all the standards of the peace-admiring outsider they were the actual goats. From composer to composer they'd slither and slip looking over manuscripts.

Here, let's say, is a saddened, droopy youth. Under his arm he carries a roll of unappreciated copy. In his hands he holds his masterpiece. His air is magnificent.

A Sample Ballad.
"This is a mere dash-off," he explains. "Rotten music, but the finest jazz. Kept running through my head yesterday while I was finishing the score of my opera. Some disturbing influence. But it kept recurring. Listen:

"The sun was slowly sinking in the golden west;
A handsome first lieutenant drew his watch out from his vest;
The boys sat in their pup tents
Drinking their evening beer.
And they marveled as the Looie spoke
These words and shed a tear."

Chorus.
"Oh, she's only a longshoreman's daughter.
But I love her as I oughter.
So I'll meet my darling Mary O
On the shores of Lake Ontario."

"Silly, dreadfully silly, of course," concedes the Christopher-street Puccini, "but only, of course, judged from my own standards. For you it should be a great money-maker. I will take a nominal sum for it and a small royalty."

"Wrong, kid, wrong," says the scout. "You won't take nothing from us but advice. Quit stalling and stealing your stuff, that's the advice. Harrigan and Hart used to sing that tune and now you're trying to jazz an old waltz that used to have 'em whistling in Toney Pastor's galleries. Kept running through your head? I'll say it did! It's been running through a million heads."

There entered the reception room at this point a tri-colored silk shirt accompanied by a snappy, form-fitting serge suit, white socks and patent-leather pumps. Enveloped by this forty-seventh-street correctness was a youth whose belief in himself amounted to fanaticism. Across the sill he began to tickle-toe hither and yon, first tapping his last word in nobby, fancy straw hats like the vaudeville young man does preparatory to his eccentric dance "That Boy and That Girl" (Jack Clever and Nona Lee, the classy pair).

A murmur arises from the assemblage of the jazz-beaux and the jazz-bells. Not all of the murmur is pure admiration. There is a certain tinge of the raspberry to be noted by the sharp ear. But does Willie Capser heed the repressed bird? Willie Capser does not.

"Felt any better I'd be afraid of little Willie," says he, regardless of the absence of leading queries. "Success! Success! I never think of this one, Mannie?" (This to the jazz scout nearest him.) "Success don't make a guy; a guy makes success."

"Who tipped you off?" soiled Mannie. The irony was wasted. Willie began a general greeting. Grabbing an unoffered hand and shaking it enthusiastically was all in the morning's work with Willie. He even seized my hand and cried:
"Glad to see you again, kid. How are they coming? Seen Irving this morning?"

Willie beat a fellow jazz-maker to a piano. He became a riot of synopated motion the moment he hit the bench. Facing 50 ill-wishers Willie began hitting the keys. His body quivered and set up a rhythmic jouncing. His patent-leathered toes tapped the piano's pedals. His dexterous hands flipped the keys rather than struck them. A professional smile suffused his thin, keen face.

Out of his adonoidal throat there issued a song that had to do with the love affairs of Mr. Ippi. If Mr. Ippi should be successful in his ardent quest for the hand of Miss Ouri would the object of the gentleman's affections become Mrs. Ippi? The song vouchsafed no direct answer to the conundrum. It was clear that Willie did not consider the omission a matter of serious import. In fact the chorus indicated that the entire procedure was successful and conventional.

"Here comes the bride! Here comes the bride!
Down to the altar at Mr. Ippi's side."

Willie Capser was quite frank about it. He had borrowed a couple of bars from a well-known bridal chorus.

"But look," demanded Willie, "what I done to it. Put some pepper into it."

His audience was melting away. A jazz scout took the offensive.

"My heavens!" he attacked. "I thought we'd heard the last of that Loneragan's bride song."

"There ain't no last to any song," returned Willie. "Wait until Paul White-

man plays this. It's another; that's what it is. I've written another of my successes."

"All right," snarled the scout. "Try another publisher."

Two jazz-belles had become involved in some slight difference of opinion. One of them was seated at the piano. She had just played her latest topical hit and the other was indulging in a little professional candor.

You must understand that everything that any composer offers to a publisher of popular music is a hit. It makes no difference whether the thing is published or not. Before it is written it is a hit. Its author is, by his or her own admission, a writer of hits. A harnessmaker turns out harness. A cooper makes barrels. A writer of hits evolves hits. Elementary logic.

"Just finished my latest hit," announces the expert in cacophony. "Want to hear it. Listen."

"Never mind," says the publisher.

"I've heard it."

"Nix, nix, Moe. You ain't heard this. That was the one before you heard. This ain't been played in public yet."

"Neither has the one before, yet. No, never mind. Chances are I heard it five years ago before you copped it."

Unsolicited Criticism.

Well, the jazz-belle at the piano had knocked off her very latest topical hit (a bigger craze than the "Little Red Schoolhouse Rag" by the same author).

"No, dearie," purred the queen who had listened. "No, dearie. It's lovely and, believe me, I know how you feel about it. Any girlie who has her stuff put over by me is made. I know that as well as you do. And, believe me, girlie, I'd like nothing better than to put over a nice little girlie like you. But I've got my public to think of. Giving my public what it expects from me is the secret of my great success, dearie, and it's got so now that the big money my public pays me is only a minor consideration. I can't go back on them like that. Otherwise I'd try your song."

"Say," interrupted the jazz-belle at the piano, "who said I wrote this hit for you? Didn't you ask me for what I had? And didn't I accommodate you? And, listen, cutie, where do you get this stuff about your public?"

"Don't be impertinent, girlie. Not that I don't see your side of it. But if I had let disappointments get my nanny, where do you think I'd been by this time instead of where I am?"

"Maybe you'd been working regular And say, cutie, where did you work at the Palace?"

"Why don't you move into the city dearie, and keep in touch with the news?"

"What happens in the Palace you worked in never gets this far, cutie."

"There, there, dearie," soothed vaudeville's favorite in open-hearth process tones. "There, there. Don't take disappointment so hard. I'm your friend, dearie, even if my public demands something a little more refined than your hits."

Some of the Immortals.

Upon the walls of the reception room and here and there elsewhere hung portraits of such makers of melody as Ted Snyder, Georges Bizet, Gaetano Donizetti, Franz Lehar, Ernest R. Ball, Richard Wagner, Victor Herbert, Irving Berlin, Harry Lauder, Ethelbert Nevin, Jules Massenet, Enrico Caruso, Johann Sebastian Bach, Mitza Hajos, George Friedrich Handel, Reginald DeKoven, Claude Achille Debussy, Gitz Rice, John Philip Sousa, Harry von Tilzer, Charles Francos Gounod, Bert Williams and, in the words of the song plugger, others too numerous to mention. Most of them, possibly all of them, had contributed to the melodies that have been poured forth by this house of a thousand hits to cause the public to shake its shimmy and the pulpit to shake its finger.

"Of course," said the director of the Social Register orchestra (the boys that put the zizzzz into jazz; every man a soloist), "there's a lot of those guys who wouldn't stand a chance today. The public is demanding a little more speed, see. Any guy trying to put over 'Il Trovatore' or 'Aida' or 'Tannhauser,' the way they stand, would starve to death these days. It's only natural, see. Verdi and Wagner were all right before the managers started dance-floors, but it's like the writing game. Only last week a big magazine writer who is in here offering some lyrics, says it's like that with the writing game. He mentions a lot of guys like Dickens and Tolstol and Longfellow and a lot more I can't remember, and says that they wouldn't stand a chance today with the editors."

"It's like that with music. The singers are getting wise, too. My own brother was singing nothing but grand opera, 'Il Trovatore,' 'Boheme' and 'Carmen,' and he was getting over big when he takes a flop to jazz. I wisied him. I showed him that the classical stuff was dying out and the jaz taking its place and he seen it quick. Of course, it's like a lot of other things, like in the writing game, like that guy says last week, you can't let grand opera stuff drop cold. You writing guys think of Dickens and Tolstol and Longfellow every now and then just like the composers do the classical boys, Verdi and Wagner and the rest of them."

"But you know in your game how it is. For instance, when you write this piece up you ain't going to handle it like Dickens or Tolstol or Longfellow would, are you?"

"No," I agreed, "I'm not."