

As If Massenet's Ghost Forbade the Opera

How the Dying Composer's Sentimental Whim Was Invoked by Lucy Arbell, the English Prima Donna, to Forbid Mary Garden to Sing the Title Role in "Cleopatra"



Lucy Arbell, Who the Dying Composer, Massenet, Declared Should Be the Only Woman Who Should Sing the Title Role in His Magnificent Opera of Ancient Egypt.

WHEN the great French composer Massenet died he tied up his famous opera "Cleopatra" with a strange stipulation in his will—that the magnificent title role of the opera should be sung only by the composer's dear friend, Miss Lucy Arbell. And this sentimental whim of the dying composer has haunted this opera ever since—as if Massenet's ghost reached out from his grave to jealously safeguard the interests of the woman he loved so dearly.

And thus it happened that Mary Garden came face to face with this spectral forbidding hand of the great composer when she attempted to sing Cleopatra a few weeks ago in Paris. The French courts were appealed to for an injunction to forbid her to sing the role of the enchantress of the Nile, because Massenet had so directed in his will.

Already the same plea had been made to another court and an injunction had been issued in Monte Carlo some years ago forbidding Mme. Marie Kousnezoff, the Russian prima donna, to appear as Cleopatra. Miss Arbell brought the legal proceedings at that time and secured her injunction.

Everything was ready at the Monte Carlo Opera House. The company had been assembled and the costumes had been prepared with great magnificence. The charming and very pretty Russian singer was an exquisite figure in the role of the Siren of the Nile. The programmes had been printed and the tickets had been sold.

Under these circumstances the court which issued the injunction decided that the performance might go on provided the managers of the opera furnish a generous bond to satisfy any damages which their production of the opera might do to Lucy Arbell and her claims under the will of the dead composer.

The opera was produced. Lucy Arbell brought suit against the executors of the Massenet estate because they had authorized the production of the opera contrary to the terms of the will and had received the royalties from the productions. It was an interesting suit and Lucy Arbell won a verdict of \$6,000, which has been appealed by the administrators of the estate.

When, the other day, Mary Garden was billed in the title role of this magnificent opera in Paris Lucy Arbell began once more to put in motion the same legal machinery which she had invoked in the courts at Monte Carlo to restrain the beautiful Russian prima donna.

But the French courts took a rather different view, a rather broader view than the courts of Monte Carlo. Considering all the facts in the situation, the French courts declined to grant an injunction because it would shut out from the public a meritorious presentation of a great musical work of art interpreted by one of the foremost musical artists of the day. While it was true, the court argued, that a literal interpretation of the dead composer's wishes would undoubtedly forbid this presentation of Massenet's Cleopatra unless Lucy Arbell sang the leading part, yet there were other and broader considerations than the sentimental whim of the old composer.

license the production of the opera without Lucy Arbell in the title role, then no grievance arose for these immediate heirs of the composer.

When the court came to consider the relationship of Miss Lucy Arbell herself it reasoned that since Miss Arbell was not invited to sing in the title role she was not being personally crowded out of a possible opportunity of substituting herself for Mary Garden. What then remained as to Lucy Arbell's claim for damages? There appeared to be nothing which could not be determined by a jury which could listen to all the facts of the case and assess what ever monetary damages Miss Arbell was entitled to. And this verdict of damages, if there should be one would have to be paid by Massenet's estate.

If, therefore, the administrator of Massenet's estate would put up a sufficient bond to satisfy any verdict of damages which Lucy Arbell might eventually get from a French court because Mary Garden sang the role of Cleopatra, then the opera might be sung. And so it was that Mary Garden was enabled at last to sing Cleopatra at the opening of the splendid new Parisian playhouse, the Theatre Lyrique, on October 29, in spite of the spectral hand of the dead composer.

The story behind this tale of a haunted opera is one of the last love of a genius of many loves. Jules Frederick Emile Massenet had a pupil and friend in Lucy Arbell. She was a handsome English woman who had lived so long in Paris that she was in spirit and in manner a Parisienne. Her name was Georgette Wallace. She was the sister of Captain Richard Wallace, of the British army.

Massenet was unlike most composers. He did not emphasize the voice of the singer who created his roles. He considered first and last and most of the time her personality. Did she look the part? Was she the type who

might have caused the conflict of wills, the clash of love and hate, the tragedy of the opera in real life? If she was gloriously beautiful and might be the living, palpitating heroine of a songless drama she would serve. Often her personality inspired the writing of the opera. He wrote the opera Cleopatra with an eye of intense admiration upon Lucy Arbell. "I am fortunate in having the perfect type for Cleopatra. She looks Cleopatra, lives Cleopatra, is Cleopatra reincarnate," he said, his dark eyes glowing, his nervous, tapering fingers striking great crashing chords on the piano.

"But, chere maitre," protested a famous French singer who had toured the Summer resorts of France and Switzerland with Miss Arbell. "I trust I do not offend you when I remind you of the voice. She sings like a pheasant."

Massenet struck more chords. "Her voice will improve. I am teaching her," he replied less nervously, with more dignity.

"What matters is that she is Cleopatra. Her voice is secondary."

He died in his seventieth year. Dying he remembered Cleopatra and Miss Arbell. He wrote a line which he intended to be a codicil to his will. He said, "It is my wish that my friend and pupil, Mlle. Lucy Arbell, shall create the role of Cleopatra and that she alone shall sing it if she so desire."

But in spite of this, upon the broad reasoning of the French courts, as already outlined above, Mary Garden thrived fashionably in Paris at the Lyrique with a splendid presentation of Cleopatra. But the performance was haunted by a woman's tears and the foiled will of the dead composer.

For Massenet was the man who did not care. He was the artist extraordinary, the man who placed his love before his work. Lucy Arbell, a handsome English woman, shed the last glow of romance over his declining years. He wrote his last operas for her. Sitting at the piano he had



Mary Garden in the Costume of Cleopatra, Which Lucy Arbell Tried to Stop Her from Singing in Paris.

taught her to sing the title roles. What though a French opera singer, touring the Summer resorts with her in Terese and Werther, said: "It is dreadful. One of the most beautiful blondes in the world! But her voice!"

Massenet was the exceptional artist. Eugene Walter, actuated by love of his art, refused to allow his wife, Charlotte Walker, to appear in one of his plays. Nor tears nor entreaties swayed him. "Not this time, dear. You may act in one of my plays, but not in this," he said. And his will prevailed. So Willard Mack, the musicless Massenet, who wrote plays for all of his three successive wives, would not permit his recent third, Pauline Frederick, to play the title role in a drama of his.

"Another, not this," he said. Which may have contributed to their recent divorce.

Both these playwrights loved their wives. But they loved their plays more.

Yet Massenet, foremost composer of France, cared not who sang his operas, provided she was beautiful and he was enamored of her.

He wrote "Esclarmonde" for Sibyl Sanderson. "But her voice is thin and worn. Except for her high G there is nothing notable in her voice," counseled her friends.

"I care not. She will fill the eye gloriously. She is the only American singer I have ever known who has temperament. You will see that she will sing it," he answered.

"That is the way of Massenet.

When Jules Emile Frederik Massenet wrote an opera for a woman Paris did not say: "Is this a new voice?" It said, "Is this a new fancy of chere Maitre's!" Usually it was.

He wrote "Thais," a second opera, for the magnificent Sibyl Sanderson, but allowed Lina Cavalieri to create the role. Because in the interval between "Esclarmonde" and "Thais" the beautiful Californienne had fallen hopelessly in love with Antonio Terry, the Cuban multimillionaire.

Learning which, Massenet wrote another opera for someone else—"La Nayaraise," for Emma Calve. The sumptuous singer created La Nayaraise, and for a long time Massenet cherished for her an exceeding admiration.

It is the gossip of Paris that La Belle Sanderson, returning from America, her country that had coldly received her, went to the composer's studio and begged him to write another opera for her.

"But no!" he said, with a bow. "You are unhappy in love. One cannot sing when she is unhappy in love. It is happy love that releases the imprisoned voice from the dungeons of the heart."

It was, too, the gossip of Paris that, crushed by her disappointment, the lovely Sanderson swallowed a dose of a poisonous drug. A doctor and a stomach pump ended the dramatic interview. Massenet never wrote another opera for her.

But in the case of the beautiful Englishwoman, a daughter, so Paris says, of Sir Richard Wallace, of England, there were



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that he might suggest a musician capable of directing her musical studies. List immediately sent her to me.

"You have guessed, my dear children, that this exquisite young girl was she who, two years later, was to become my loving wife, the attentive and at times worried companion of my days, the witness of my frailties and my strength, of my sadness and joys."

Massenet, who wrote "Manon" and "Cendrillon," "Ariane" and "Les Jongleur de Paris," was accounted an excellent business man. But of this he gave no evidence when he arranged for the production of his last work. He left a scribbled line: "I desire that my friend and pupil, Lucy Arbell, be permitted to create the role of Cleopatra if she wishes."

She did wish. With all the intensity of her nature she wished to be the first Cleopatra. But the hastily written request was not litigation proof.

Raoul Gunsburg, manager of the Monte Carlo Opera House, ignoring the injunction secured by her, produced "Cleopatre" with Marie Kousnezoff in the title role.

Monsieur Gunsburg retained Maitre Labori, the eloquent defender of Dreyfus, who saved the alleged traitor from Devil's Island, to defend him. Labori argued that the general and artistic reputation of so great a composer as Jules Massenet best would be preserved by ignoring a bequest which obviously was the outcome of an emotional sentiment for an intimate friend. The higher court granted Miss Arbell six thousand dollars damages.

The Chicago Opera Company, desiring to produce "Cleopatre," arranged with the publishers of the opera, Hugel & Company, of Paris, for the rights to produce it in America. Last season Mary Garden sang it in Chicago and New York without let or hindrance from the actively litigant Miss Arbell.

Campanini intends again to repeat it in both cities and says Miss Arbell must present to the publishers any legal claims she may have upon the opera.

But the beautiful Englishwoman, it seems, protests only against other artists singing the part in Paris. When she learned that the managers of the new Theatre Lyrique, in Paris, were to produce it she asked for another injunction. Mary Garden sang Cleopatre at the new theatre, then sailed for America. And Miss Arbell threatens another suit for damages.

Musicians call "Cleopatre" the haunted opera. Certainly it is haunted by Miss Arbell's memories and foiled ambitions. And by memories of the composer who believed "All for love and the work well lost."