

MY LIFE IN THE CLAUQUE

A GREAT many people whom I have talked to during intermissions at the Metropolitan Opera House seem opposed to the idea of a permanent claque, some going so far as to call it a cheap, disgraceful racket. There was, of course, a permanent claque at the Metropolitan when Gatti-Casazza was director, and there were permanent claques at La Scala, Milan, the Paris Opéra, the Prague National Theatre, and the Warsaw Opera, where at one time a fellow by the name of Artur Rodzinski acted as claque chef. And there was nothing disgraceful about the claque at the Vienna Staatsoper, which I had the honor of belonging to in the middle twenties.

The claque was far more exclusive than the aristocratic Jockey Club. Anybody with a good family tree and who hadn't been caught stealing silver spoons could get into the Jockey Club. To become a member of the claque you had to know by heart the scores of popular operas—all airs, recitatives, solo numbers. In addition, some courage and diplomacy were essential. The claque chef's name was Schostal. He had become a claqueur under Gustav Mahler and at one time or another he had worked for Scotti, Hesch, Titta Ruffo, Chaliapin, Galli-Curci, Farrar, and Caruso. The claque consisted of thirty to forty regulars, youthful lovers of good opera, most of whom, like myself, were somewhat insolvent students at the Vienna Conservatory or the Akademie für Musik und Darstellende Kunst. If we had two *Schilling* we would rather spend them for an opera ticket than for a dinner. However, we had to eat now and then, so we all tried to get into the claque. The "work" was fun and we were given a free admission to the standing room. Schostal was a citizen of the world and liked foreigners, so at one time there were two Frenchmen, a Czech, a Chinese, an Ethiopian prince, and an American pianist from Cleveland among his employees.

I met Schostal one night after the opera. Pachtinger, a fellow-violinist at the Conservatory and a member of the claque, took me to the Peterskeller, a noisy, smoke-filled cellar across from the Staatsoper and frequented by night chauffeurs and bums, where Schostal was sitting at a table in the rear, near a battered piano. He was a powerfully built man with a black mustache and

sideburns and an immense bald head. His family owned large textile mills. When Schostal, a passionate opera fan, discarded the flourishing textile business in favor of the claque, the disgraced family broke off relations, except that every year they sent him a Christmas parcel containing material for a new suit—always the same material, blue serge. This accounted for Schostal's wardrobe of nineteen more or less worn blue-serge suits.

Schostal listened while Pachtinger introduced me, and then moved over to the piano and hammered out a few bars from "Salome," "Fledermaus," "Lucia di Lammermoor," "Walküre," and "The Queen of Sheba." After each piece I had to tell the act and the scene from which it came. The air was heavy with the smell of goulash and cigars, and the guests were noisily discussing politics. Schostal held his beer mug in his left hand and played the "Liebestod" with his right. "All right," he said to Pachtinger. "We'll try him out at 'Tristan' next Sunday. There is little to do."

A CLAQUEUR'S operatic perspective is really upside down. "Tristan und Isolde," "Walküre," "Götterdämmerung," "Pelléas et Mélisande," and "Elektra" are extremely "light" operas. The claque works only at the end of each act; there is no other applause. On the other hand, Rossini, Massenet, Verdi, Puccini, and Bizet operas are very "difficult." Take, for instance, the second act of "Carmen," a claqueur's nightmare. You start working right after Carmen's gypsy song, "*Les tringles des sistres tintaient*," and you applaud after her dance with the castanets. Then Escamillo enters (applause), sings his famous "Couplets" (applause), and leaves (more applause). By that time the public is likely to applaud spontaneously after each number—the quintet (Carmen,

Mercédès, Frasquita, and the smugglers), Don José's offstage *a capella* song, Carmen's dance for Don José, and the tenor's famous "*La fleur que tu m'avais jetée*." The trouble is that the enthusiastic listeners are apt to break into "wild" applause in the wrong places, such as in the middle of an aria, after an effective high C. In Vienna, where opera was a way of life and even the small boys discussed opera as they dis-

cuss baseball in this country, "wild" applause was considered heresy and one of the claque's functions was to influence public acclaim into orderly channels.

Our claque's base of operations was the *Juchhe*, high up in the fourth gallery, where the acoustics were best. At the extreme left, Schostal occupied a *Säulensitz*. This was one of the two seats behind each massive marble pillar, from which you couldn't see the stage. They were sold at half price, mostly to music-lovers who didn't care or to out-of-town people who didn't know and who therefore had the tantalizing experience of hearing Jeritza as Tosca and not seeing her. From his headquarters, overlooking the gallery, Schostal directed the claque, which was scattered around in inconspicuous groups of two or three.

Schostal had a perfect sense of timing and he had a showman's instinct for the mood of the public. He could feel whether an aria was going over or not. A claqueur's most unpardonable crime is to start applause which is not taken up by the public and perhaps is even drowned out by enraged hisses. Schostal seldom made a mistake. He himself never applauded during a performance—generals don't shoot rifles—but at the end of an exceptionally good one he would step down to the breastwork and benevolently clap his hands for the stars. They never failed to look up and give him a smile. During an ordinary, more or less routine performance, Schostal would get up from his seat shortly before he had to give a cue, and the claqueurs, throughout the gallery, could see his bald skull shining under the pillar lamp. There would be from ten to thirty of us, depending on how many clients we had in the cast. At the critical moment he would give the cue, a short nod to three lieutenants standing behind him, and they would start applauding in a cautious, subdued manner; the rest of us would fall in, and within three seconds a wave of applause would sweep the house.

Schostal detested high-pressure methods and preached subtlety. "The best claque works in secrecy," he said. "We must not impose applause upon the audience. We stimulate them and give them the cue at the right time and they take care of the rest."

The business of giving the cue demanded perfect timing. Many operatic airs end with a high, sustained note and the artists deliberately build toward that ultimate bravura effect. You have to start applauding at the instant the last



note ends, while the public is still under the singer's magic spell. To start too early, as do all amateurs, spoils the carefully calculated effect. If you wait too long, the conductor leads the orchestra right into the next piece and the opportunity for a spontaneous ovation is gone. Conductors hate it if the singers get too much applause during the acts, because they want to get home and take off their dress suits and stiff collars.

THERE wasn't any special training. Newcomers to the claque would be assigned to a group of claqueurs operating during the less "difficult" operas. I worked during "Tristan," "Siegfried," and "Salome" before I was given my first independent assignment, just before a performance of "Rigoletto," with Selma Kurz as Gilda, Piccaver as the Duke, and Bohnen as Rigoletto. At a brief conference in the foyer preceding the opera, Schostal gave me orders to start a "short salvo" after Rigoletto's monologue in the second scene of the first act. It was a difficult job; baritones are always a little hard to handle when co-starred with famous divas and tenors, and Rigoletto's recitative, short and not especially impressive, is followed immediately by Gilda's appearance. I was standing with two fellow-claqueurs at the extreme right of the gallery. On special occasions, when there was a great deal of work to be done, Schostal always appointed extra lieutenants who were stationed at various points in the gallery. They would individually start the applause on their own initiative, which gave a better impression of spontaneity than if Schostal started it all himself. People get suspicious if they hear applause always emanating from the same spot. Bohnen began his soliloquy, "*Pari siamo!*" My heart was beating wildly and I am sure that I was far more excited than Bohnen himself. I stared down into the vast, dark auditorium, with two thousand people silently listening, and I thought I would never have the courage to clap my hands. I had the absurd feeling that everybody would turn around and look at me. My cue came and I sent a prayer to heaven, hoping that somebody else would applaud first, but nothing happened. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and boldly clapped my hands. Then there came response from other spots in the gallery, from the boxes and the orchestra stalls, and suddenly a cataract of applause was sweeping the house. It was the sweetest sound I've ever heard. During intermission, Schostal called me



"It's just that I happen to have a hell of a turnover."

to the buffet in the foyer and bought me a Dehmel chocolate cookie for twenty *Groschen* and a glass of water for ten *Groschen*, which was his way of promoting a novice to a full-fledged senior member of the claque. This meant I could come any night I wanted to and get my free ticket.

Members of the claque never got anything except the ticket. We had nothing to do with business details, which were attended to by Schostal. Of course, everybody knew that he was given money by the singers and that he bought the tickets and kept part of the money for himself, but this seemed fair enough. There was no set fee. The artists gave him as much as they thought applause in a particular rôle

was worth. They all knew that Schostal was incorruptible and never took money from singers who were not good enough for special applause. Once the ambitious wife of a Viennese *Grossindustrieller*, who reputedly had influence in the Unterrichts-Ministerium and with the management of the Opera, was to sing "*Tosca*." The *Grossin* called Schostal to his office and offered him a thousand *Schilling* for tickets and another thousand for himself. Schostal said, "Sorry, but Madame is not good enough for the Staatsoper," and left. The furious husband bought up hundreds of seats, which he distributed among his acquaintances, but the result was disastrous. They applauded at the wrong moments and in such

an obnoxious manner that the enraged public started hissing. From his seat, his hands folded in his lap, Schostal watched the tragedy with grim satisfaction. Madame was through forever.

If Schostal really liked a great singer, he didn't mind working without any compensation. When Kirsten Flagstad sang for the first time in Vienna, Schostal went to see her and offered his services, as he always did in the case of famous singers who hadn't appeared in Vienna before. Madame Flagstad refused, unaware of the local practice. After the first act of "Tristan," Schostal said, "She's great. Get going, boys." The next day Flagstad sent for him and became a steady client.

Puccini's "Turandot" had a double première in Vienna. The first night, Lotte Lehmann and Leo Slezak were starred as Turandot and Calaf; the following evening the parts were sung by two younger stars, Maria Nemeth and Jan Kiepura. Having studied the score of "Turandot," Schostal knew that Kiepura's young, brilliant tenor would be better for the high part of Calaf than the aging Slezak's, and gave orders to "build up" Kiepura. A few months later, Slezak stopped singing the part and Kiepura had the field to himself.

The claque was frequently denounced by the critics, who were reluctant to share with us their right to influence the public, but it was neverthe-

less tolerated by the directors of the Opera. Some of them, like Felix von Weingartner and Franz Schalk, preferred regulated applause to the enthusiastic outbursts of amateurs. Bruno Walter always had some kind word for us. (Schostal never took money from any conductor.) Richard Strauss considered the claque a necessary evil, like the ladies of the chorus, the ticket jobbers outside the Opera, and the cockroaches under the plush seats of the *Kaiserloge*. When Clemens Krauss became the director of the Opera, he publicly threatened to "rub out the claque." Schostal took up the challenge. The following evening Krauss conducted "Don Giovanni." Schostal bought thirty expensive orchestra seats, which he distributed among those of us who owned tuxedos. When Krauss entered we started a terrific ovation. During the intermission Schostal asked Krauss how he liked our work.

"Don't be ridiculous," Krauss said. "The applause was made by my followers in the *Parkett*. Since when do your boys sit in orchestra seats?"

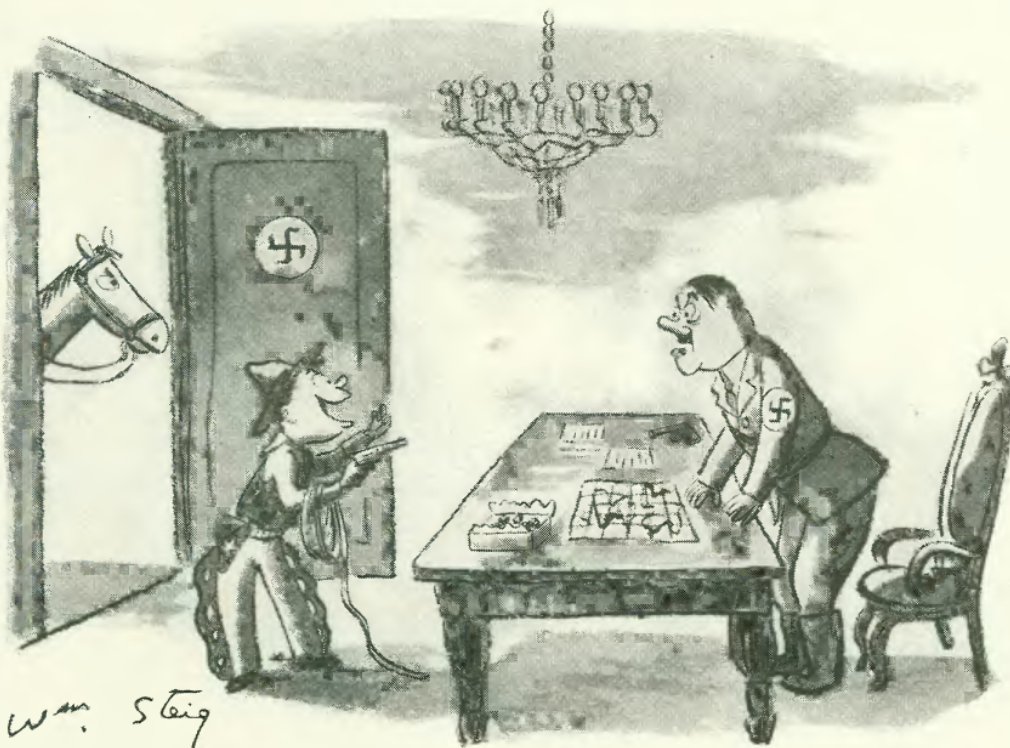
During the second act, we applauded too early after Don Giovanni's "*Deh vieni alla finestra*" and after Don Otavio's beautiful "*Il mio tesoro intanto*" and started several "wild" salvos. After the cemetery scene several of our boys shouted "Bravo, Walter!" and when told by kindly neighbors that Krauss, not Bruno Walter, was conducting,

they looked dumfounded and unhappy. The midday papers played up the story and for weeks thereafter Krauss was greeted by malicious friends with "Bravo, Walter!" After that, Krauss didn't object to the claque any more.

Many performances were saved by the claque—the dull nights when an uninspired conductor, a lukewarm orchestra, and singers walking through their parts might have made the audience wish they had stayed home and saved their money. The apathetic atmosphere presented a challenge to Schostal. Giving orders right and left, directing carefully timed outbursts, he would wake up the house. Suddenly the singers would snap out of their lethargy, the orchestra would play beautifully, and the conductor would get worked up. Schostal derived great professional satisfaction from these blood transfusions and was always happy when he heard people saying, "A had first act, but the rest was wonderful."

PAID applause at the Staatsoper was not limited to the claque. There was a second group, numerically and, we always insisted, musically inferior, who had their headquarters down in the parterre standing room. They were known as the clique, which must have been confusing to the layman, and their leader was a man named Stieglitz who carried a heavy cane, was not given to subtle treatment of applause, and was frequently mentioned in Viennese newspapers in connection with alleged attempts at blackmail. The undeclared war between the claque and the clique exploded into a showdown one night, when "Rosenkavalier" was being given with Lotte Lehmann as the Feldmarschallin and Maria Jeritza as Octavian. Mme. Jeritza was a client of the clique, Mme. Lehmann was our favorite client.

After a special conference with his lieutenants at the Peterskeller, Schostal decided to send one of his men, by the name of Loew, down among the clique in the parterre. This Loew was a husky fellow, and, like Siegfried, he had not learned what fear was. Loew's orders were to watch for possible flaws in Jeritza's performance and to subtly influence the bystanders in favor of Lehmann. Loew played his part



DREAMS OF GLORY

well. He closed his eyes in deep enchantment while Lehmann sang her air in the first act. When Jeritza missed one cue by an eighth of a bar, he seemed surprised and whispered, "I'm afraid she's through." Soon the whole standing-room section was under the impression that Lehmann was wonderful and Jeritza should go home and practice.

Afraid that this defeatist sentiment might spread into the auditorium, the clique characteristically decided to solve the problem by brute force. Stieglitz ordered two of his boys to push Loew out of the standing-room section. Loew stood firm. The three were shoving back and forth, like boxers in a clinch. All through the beautiful "Presentation of the Rose," a silent, grim battle was raging between Loew and his opponents, but they were so careful not to make a noise that only the nearest bystanders were aware of what was going on. After the performance Loew looked beaten up and the pockets were torn out of his coat, but he didn't mind. He was happy at seeing Lehmann called before the curtain more often than Jeritza. At the Kaerntnerstrasse stage door, we gave Madame Lehmann a tremendous ovation. This was the high point of our activities and of course one for which we made no charge. All was fine until the clique tried to break it up.

I don't remember who started the ensuing free-for-all. We were all arrested, claue and clique, and were brought to the nearest police station. Schostal, looking dignified even without the tie and hat he'd lost in battle, explained to the *Inspektor* in charge that the clique had deliberately torpedoed a celebration for Lehmann after her great performance.

Stieglitz tried to protest, but the *Inspektor* told him to shut up. "I was at the Opera myself," he said. "Lehmann was great. Jeritza overplayed in the third act, as usual. That woman's getting older." He ordered the clique boys locked up for the night. We were told to leave.

Schostal said, "Thank you, sir," his voice betraying satisfaction that Viennese justice still prevailed. We said good night to one another and went home.

Shortly after the German occupation of Vienna, Schostal vanished and was reportedly sent to a concentration camp. He was a Roman Catholic and he hated the Nazis, but some former members of the claue still think that his fight with the clique was what was really responsible for his arrest.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

A CLASSIC WAITS FOR ME



(WITH APOLOGIES TO WALT WHITMAN,
PLUS A TRIAL MEMBERSHIP IN
THE CLASSICS CLUB)



A classic waits for me, it contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if taste were lacking, or if the endorsement of the right man were lacking.

O clublife, and the pleasures of membership,
O volumes for sheer fascination unrivalled.

Into an armchair endlessly rocking,

Walter J. Black my president,

I, freely invited, cordially welcomed to membership,

My arm around John Kieran, Hendrik Willem van Loon, Pearl S. Buck,

My taste in books guarded by the spirit of William Lyon Phelps

(From your memories, sad brothers, from the fitful risings and callings I heard),

I to the classics devoted, brother of rough mechanics, beauty-parlor technicians,
spot welders, radio-program directors

(It is not necessary to have a higher education to appreciate these books),

I, connoisseur of good reading, friend of connoisseurs of good reading
everywhere,

I, not obligated to take any specific number of books, free to reject any volume,
perfectly free to reject Montaigne, Erasmus, Milton,

I, in perfect health except for a slight cold, pressed for time, having only a few
more years to live,

Now celebrate this opportunity.

Come, I will make the club indissoluble,

I will read the most splendid books the sun ever shone upon,

I will start divine magnetic groups,

With the love of comrades,

With the life-long love of distinguished committees.

I strike up for an Old Book.

Long the best-read figure in America, my dues paid, sitter in armchairs
everywhere, wanderer in populous cities, weeping with Hecuba and with
the late William Lyon Phelps,

Free to cancel my membership whenever I wish,

Turbulent, fleshy, sensible,

Never tiring of clublife,

Always ready to read another masterpiece provided it has the approval of my
president, Walter J. Black,

Me imperturbe, standing at ease among writers,

Rais'd by a perfect mother and now belonging to a perfect book club,

Bearded, sunburnt, gray-neck'd, astigmatic,

Loving the masters and the masters only

(I am mad for them to be in contact with me),

My arm around Pearl S. Buck, only American woman to receive the Nobel
Prize for Literature,

I celebrate this opportunity.

And I will not read a book nor the least part of a book but has the approval of
the Committee,

For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times and not hit,
that which they hinted at,

All is useless without readability.

By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on
the same terms (89¢ for the Regular Edition or \$1.39 for the De Luxe
Edition, plus a few cents postage).

I will make inseparable readers with their arms around each other's necks,

By the love of classics,

By the manly love of classics.

—E. B. W.