

## THE CLAQUE CHEF GETS AN OVATION

LIFE was never dull for the members of the permanent claque at the Vienna Staatsoper, which I joined in the middle twenties. We were a cheerful fraternity of enthusiastic opera lovers. Many of the members were, like myself, impecunious music students, unable to afford orchestra stalls and late suppers at the Hotel Sacher, as the ladies and gentlemen in the *Parkett* could, but nevertheless happy to get free standing room in the fourth gallery in return for applauding at the right moment and in the right manner. Joseph Schostal, the claque chef, a tall, erect, impressive man who carried himself with the casual dignity of a general descended from a distinguished line of generals, often said that when he set down his memoirs they would make more exciting reading than the dry reminiscences of Hötzendorf or Lüdendorff. None of us thought this to be an overstatement.

Schostal, an Austrian *Oberleutnant* in the last war, displayed presence of mind, self-control, and a great deal of resoluteness in critical moments. During a performance of "La Forza del Destino," in 1926, Vienna was hit by an earthquake just as the tenor, Koloman Pataky, a client of the claque, was singing Don Alvaro's air "*O tu che in seno agli angeli.*" The big crystal chandelier began to sway alarmingly and the listeners high up in the fourth gallery had a funny feeling in the pit of their stomachs, the Viennese being less accustomed to violent shocks than the citizens of Los Angeles or Tokio. A few women squeaked and two or three nervous claqueurs tried to rush toward the exits. That night about twenty-five members of the claque were on duty, some in groups of three scattered all around the gallery, the rest in a clump gathered behind Schostal, who, from his *Säulensitz*, a seat behind a marble pillar at the extreme left, controlled the claque's operations. Sensing that a panic was imminent, Schostal jumped up and raised his hand in an admonitory gesture which was noticed by the claqueurs all over the gallery. "Spread the word," he said in a soft but firm voice to those of us nearest him. "Nobody leaves until the end of Pataky's air. Soldiers don't leave their posts before the attack!" Pataky got his ovation and the audience regained its composure, assuming, apparently, that the situation couldn't be so bad, since the claque was functioning normally.

The members of the claque met informally every day at noon, under the Staatsoper arcades on the Kärntnerstrasse, where Schostal gave out the orders for the evening and chatted with the singers who came to the theatre to rehearse. He would sit on the bench near the janitor's box with Richard Mayr or Erik Schmedes, the once-famous Wagnerian tenor, but by then an impoverished, sick old man who nostalgically came back to the place of his triumphs.

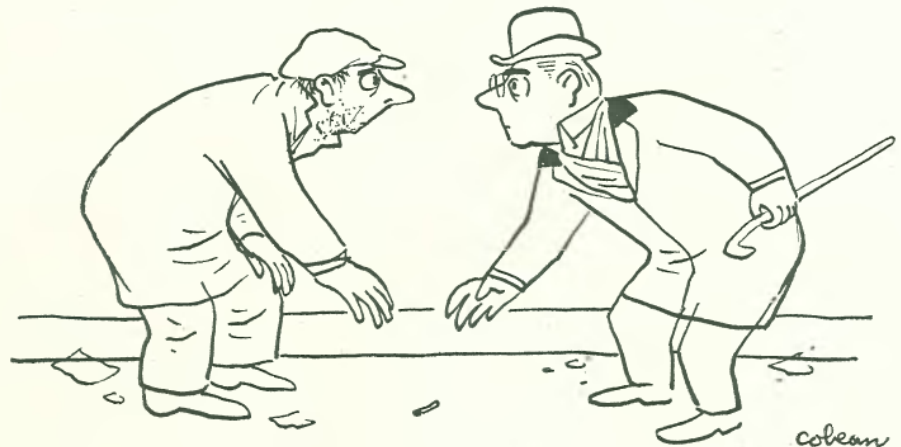
IN the afternoon, Schostal rested at his apartment like a great prima donna, and was not to be disturbed except in an emergency. "A claque chef needs more strength than a *Heldentenor*," he would say. One afternoon, before a performance of "Rigoletto," with Jan Kiepura as the Duke, I was at Schostal's apartment discussing with him the plans for the evening—"a spontaneous ovation after '*La donna è mobile*,' forcing Kiepura to repeat the air"—when Marcel, Kiepura's secretary and also one of the claque's regular members, rushed in, breathless with excitement. "The order has been changed," he said, quoting Scarpia's words from the second act of "Tosca." "I have altered my purpose. Cavaradossi will be shot. Pay attention. *Come facemmo del Conte Palmieri.*" Marcel was always talking in opera quotations. He went on to explain that Kiepura was in great voice and wanted a special ovation which would "force" him to repeat not only "*La donna è mobile*" but also his great air, "*Questa o quella*," in the first act.

Never in its history had the claque demanded a repetition of "*Questa o quella*," and Schostal refused. Marcel added that there would be a bonus of two hundred *Schillinge*, but money meant little to Schostal, who was an artist at heart, and he still refused, so Marcel

dropped that angle, merely observing, with diplomatic finesse, that it would make claque history to force a repetition of "*Questa o quella*" and that the chances were never better, since Kiepura was in splendid form. This remark turned the trick. Schostal called up Professor Karl Alwin, the conductor of the evening, and cautiously disclosed his intentions. Alwin said, "I'm the *Kapellmeister*, and I bow to no one but to my audience." That was all Schostal wanted to know. Even the best claque is powerless against a hostile conductor, who can kill the most powerful salvo with an imperceptible movement of his baton, which leads the orchestra into the next piece.

By this time it was almost six, only an hour and a half before the performance. Schostal and I ordered, by telephone, all regular members, about forty men, to report immediately for duty. Then we took a cab and raced to the Staatsoper. All the seats were sold out, as always when Kiepura sang, and about six hundred people were standing in line, waiting for the standing-room box offices to open. Right up in front were the "Kiepura girls," forty or fifty teenage females who were crazy about the tenor. They wouldn't miss a single Kiepura performance and didn't mind standing in line for hours in order to get the best places in the parterre standing room. The Kiepura girls, who were strictly amateur claqueurs, had an intense dislike for Schostal, whom they knew well, and for the claque, because we didn't refrain from applauding for Alfred Piccaver, Leo Slezak, and other tenor competitors of their beloved Kiepura.

Schostal approached the girls subtly. He happened to know, he told them, that Kiepura was better than ever. How would they like to hear him repeat "*Questa o quella*"? If they would help with a few enthusiastic outcries and







"What I can't stand is her holier-than-thou attitude."

sustained applause . . . The girls, however, smelled a rat and remained aloof. Schostal hastily added that this was Kieपुरa's birthday (which was a lie), and what more beautiful gift could a tenor wish for than a spontaneous ovation? The collaboration of the Kieपुरa girls thus practically assured, Schostal hired fifty "special" men out of the standing-room queue, reading their names from a waiting list which he always carried with him. Each man was given a free ticket and promised a *Mailänder*, a Demel chocolate cookie, after the first act, "in case of success." Regulars and reinforcements were strategically posted in groups of three or four all over the fourth gallery, and two capable lieutenants were sent down into the parterre standing room to give the Kieपुरa girls their cues.

Schostal, usually not given to defeatism, later confessed that he hadn't dared to hope the repetition would come off. But after Kieपुरa made a triumphant entrance and sang his first high notes, which stirred the audience, the claque chef turned around to my group, the bright smile of victory all over his face. At the exact fraction of a second after Kieपुरa's last note, Schostal boomed a deep, powerful "Bravo!" into the house. This famous battle cry was reserved for rare, truly great occasions. The claque broke out into a thunderous ovation, the *corps de réserve* fell in, and from downstairs came the high-pitched, ecstatic cries of the Kieपुरa girls. After that, pandemonium broke out. Many listeners got up from their seats and cheered. Professor Alwin, the conductor, gave a flawless performance of utter surprise. Twice he raised

his baton to continue and then put it down again, seemingly overpowered by "the will of the audience." At last there came the great moment when he turned back the pages of his score and motioned to the orchestra to repeat.

We didn't hear Kieपुरa as he sang "*Questa o quella*" again. We gathered around Schostal, shaking hands with him and congratulating one another. In the intermission, Schostal took us to Frau Piebitz, the *Wasserfrau* in the foyer, and bought two *Mailänders* and one glass of water for everybody whose name was on his list.

SCHOSTAL was discovered by the famous tenor Karl Aagard Oestvig one night in 1918, when Schostal, then a mere fourth-gallery enthusiast, single-handedly started a tremendous ovation after Oestvig's air "*Salut demeure*" in "Faust." At that time the claque, under the leadership of one Herr Freudenberg, an incompetent, white-bearded patriarch, was in a sorry state. Schostal belonged to a small group of opera enthusiasts who, rain, cold, and storm notwithstanding, went to the stage door after every performance to pay tribute to the singers. When Oestvig came out, Schostal would take off his hat and yell, "*Hoch Oestvig!*," and the tenor would give him a pleased smile. One evening, after Freudenberg's claque had made a particularly pitiful showing, Oestvig asked Schostal if he would like to take over on an experimental basis. The following evening, Schostal made his professional debut at a performance of "Pagliacci," with Oestvig as Canio. After "*Vesti la giubba*," the audience, inspired by Schos-

tal, kept on applauding throughout the entire intermission. Shortly thereafter, Oestvig's wife, the soprano Maria Raidl, became Schostal's second client. Schostal started to hire some of his opera-loving friends as claqueurs. They soon became the nucleus of a new, efficient claque. Among Schostal's first clients were Lotte Lehmann, Alfred Piccaver, and Maria Jeritza.

For several years, Maria Jeritza was one of our star customers. When she sang, you didn't simply applaud or cry "Bravo!" Jeritza ovations were carefully planned and masterfully

executed. During the intermission of a Jeritza performance, say in "Tosca," "Salome," "Die Tote Stadt," or "The Girl of the Golden West," Schostal divided his forces into two groups. After the last act, one group would wait under the Operngasse arcades and give Madame Jeritza a terrific ovation as she came out through the stage door and got into her car. The second group, commanded by Schostal, would run over to Stallburggasse No. 2, where Jeritza lived, and take up battle formation in front of her house. There would be a roll call on the sidewalk and Schostal would give out assignments, such as jumping on the running board of Jeritza's car and opening the door of her house. Then he would go into the Bar Sanssouci, across the street, and, standing in a phone booth from which he could see Jeritza's house, call up Gretl, the singer's secretary, and report the exact number of men present. Jeritza's car would arrive, there would be a great ovation, she would hurry upstairs and a few moments later appear at the window and throw down little bouquets, "one for every person," while Schostal, from his observation post, issued orders—"One more bow, please" or "Seventeen bouquets, please." There was, somehow, always a large number of these bouquets ready in Jeritza's house.

BOUQUETS played an important part at the première of Hermann Goetz's "The Taming of the Shrew," in 1931, which Schostal considered a highlight in the history of the claque. At that performance the title rôle was sung by Lotte Lehmann, our favorite



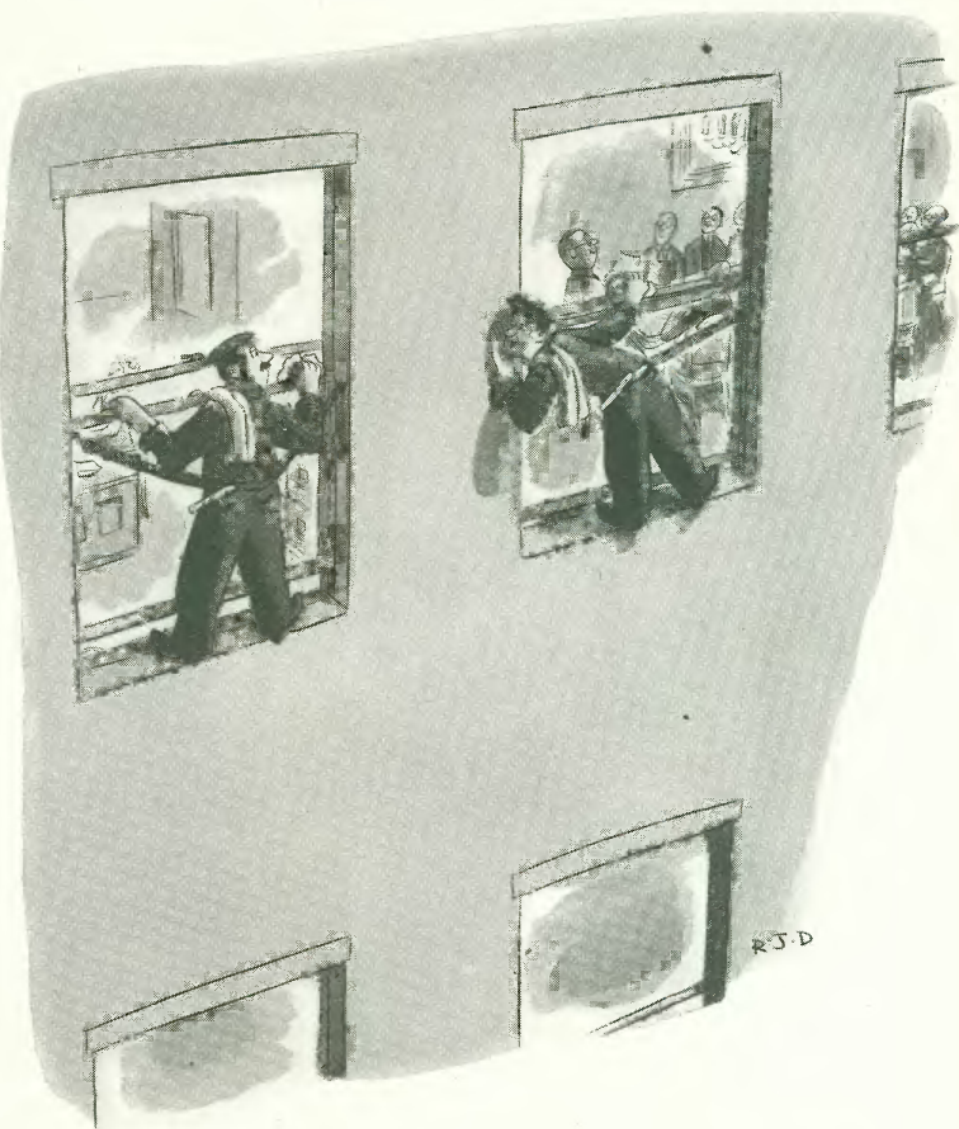
client. Schostal was informed by his spies, whom he had everywhere, that Madame Lehmann had been promised a new and splendid contract if she was a success in her part, and that Herr Schneiderhan, the *Generalintendant* himself, would be in his box. At a meeting of some of the claque in Schostal's apartment it was agreed that "special actions" had to be taken to impress the *Generalintendant*. We went to an expensive Ringstrasse flower shop and Schostal ordered a magnificent laurel wreath and forty *Wurfsträusschen*, little bunches of lilies of the valley and other sturdy plants which would survive being thrown across the orchestra pit. At the Staatsoper, there was a tradition against flowers being delivered over the footlights. We planned to defy it. That night the *Wurfsträusschen* were concealed by our men in the parterre standing room, and the wreath was smuggled in through a side door and hidden in the fourth-gallery ladies' room, the attendant of which was one of Schostal's faithful followers. As usual, not even the minutest detail was left to chance. After Madame Lehmann's great air, a claqueur by the name of Fischer, a famous obstacle racer, was to run down from the gallery with the laurel wreath. There was a short scene after the air, which would give Fischer time to arrive at the *Parkett* exactly at the end of the act. Schostal made a thorough study of the score and the action was meticulously timed.

Unfortunately, the conductor decided just before the performance to cut the short scene following Lehmann's air, and for some reason, Schostal was not notified of this change. We were still applauding after Lehmann's air when, to our horror, the curtain came down. Schostal didn't lose his presence of mind. He grabbed Fischer's sleeve and thundered, "Down!" Fischer jumped into the antechamber of the ladies' room, grabbed the wreath, and began what proved to be a historic descent. There are about two hundred stairs from the fourth gallery to the parterre floor. According to *Revierinspektor* Samek, the policeman in charge, Fischer jumped four or five stairs at a time, in neck-breaking speed. He was inside the *Parkett* with the wreath sixteen seconds after leaving the fourth gallery—a world's record, undoubtedly. We saw him run through the *Parkett* to the orchestra pit and hand the wreath to the second violinists, who put it down at Madame Lehmann's feet as she appeared for her second

bow. Simultaneously, our shock troops from the parterre standing room broke through, took the *Wurfsträusschen* out of their pockets, and threw them at the diva. Madame Lehmann, who had known nothing about the planned demonstration, stood dumfounded, and the Viennese, a people partial to pleasant surprises, broke into a clamorous ovation. The *Generalintendant*, as much impressed as everybody else, went to see Madame Lehmann in her dressing room and offered her a new contract on the spot.

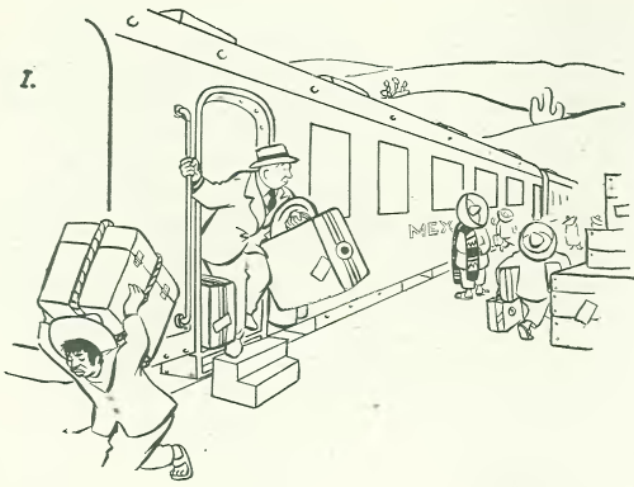
It wasn't the first time that the claque had had a hand in the inner workings of the Opera. The habitués of the arcades knew that Franz Schalk, the director of the Staatsoper, thought highly of Schostal's musical judgment. When Schalk was unable to attend the Viennese début of Gunnar Graarud, the Wagnerian tenor, Graarud's agent, Dr.

Hohenberg, sent Schalk Schostal's report on the singer—"metallic timbre, strong, brilliant high notes, clarity of diction, and perfect phrasing"—and Schalk, after an audition the following day, agreed with Schostal and offered Graarud a contract. But Schostal was prouder of the fact that several claqueurs had become opera singers and were now on the receiving end of the claque's applause. Hans Fidesser, the Berliner Staatsoper tenor, the great *Heldentenor* Julius Patzak, and the coloratura Irene Eisinger, of Salzburg fame, were all former members of the claque. Miss Eisinger, in fact, was one of the few girls ever admitted to Schostal's clan. At Patzak's first Viennese appearance as Lohengrin, Schostal arranged for cataracts of applause. Schostal's operatic knowledge was surpassed only by his youthful enthusiasm. Whenever he was fascinated by a singer's performance, he



"Do you want a hot market tip, Howard? Pacific Northern has just voted an extra dividend."





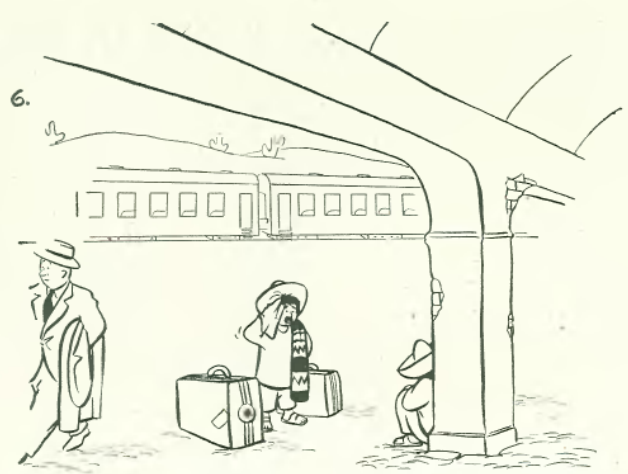
would wait for the performer at the stage door and embrace him, or her. Lotte Lehmann, Maria Jeritza, Elisabeth Schumann, Kirsten Flagstad, Selma Kurz, Richard Mayr, Hans Duhan, and Richard Tauber were among those who found themselves unexpectedly taken into Schostal's strong arms and kissed on both cheeks. Impassioned Italian singers, such as Mariano Stabile and Beniamino Gigli, were so charmed by the sincerity of Schostal's gesture that they returned his kiss. The Italians, used to the high standards of the claque in La Scala, in Milan, were fussy but very generous clients. Being skeptics, however, they paid only after the performance—not in advance, as was the customary Viennese practice. Only one Italian, Commendatore Papanio, who had a brilliant success in "Lucia di Lammermoor," at which the claque had taken an active part, departed without paying his bill. From then on, "making Papanio" became, in the fourth gallery, a synonym for double-crossing.

**T**HERE were evenings when we didn't deliver the goods and on these occasions Schostal refunded what-

ever money had been paid him. One such disaster was the début of the tenor Josef Rogatchewsky, from the Opéra Comique, who sang des Grieux in "Mignon," a part which in Vienna had for years been monopolized by Alfred Piccaver. Piccaver always sang a shortened version of "Ah! Fuyez, douce image," and when Rogatchewsky started the famous aria, none of us stopped to think that he might sing the uncut version. After the singer had finished the first part, Schostal gave the usual "cue," nodding his bald head to the claqueurs standing behind him, and thunders of applause drowned out poor M. Rogatchewsky, who kept right on singing, his beautiful pianissimi murdered by our brutal handclapping. The next morning, Schostal, heartbroken, made a pilgrimage to the Imperial Hotel. (Schostal always knew which hotel famous guest artists went to, though such information was supposed to be secret, and five minutes after Lauritz Melchior had arrived at the Meissel & Schadn, or Gigli or Rogatchewsky at the Imperial, he would be there.) Rogatchewsky was a good sport. "Ne vous en faites pas," he said to Schostal. "Deux fois

*applaudissements, c'est mieux que rien de tout."*

**S**CHOSTAL's other great passion was the ballet. He never missed a performance of "Josephslegende," "Scheherazade," "Geschichten aus dem Wiener Wald," or "Puppenfee," even when we had no clients in the cast. He was devoted to Madame Gusti Pichler, the blond, graceful, toe-dancing prima ballerina, and after every appearance accompanied her to her house on the Prinz Eugen Strasse. Madame Pichler sent Schostal pencilled notes, full of exact instructions about the timing of applause after certain dance numbers, Viennese charm, and orthographical mistakes—"Net warten, nach der letzten Pirouette," "net warten" (don't wait) three times underscored. Her bitterest enemy was Madame Krausen-ecker, the assistant prima ballerina, whom Pichler hated with all her excitable little heart. The prima ballerina was a client of the claque and Krausen-ecker was not, but Schostal never concealed his enthusiasm, even if it didn't run parallel with his business interests, and once after a "Josephslegende" with

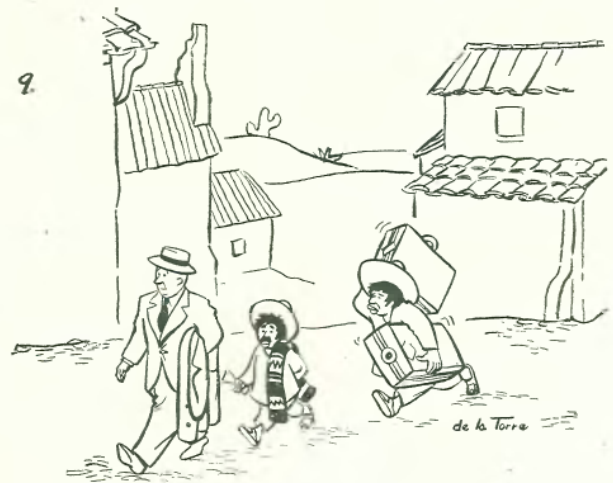


Krausenecker as Potiphar he shouted his famous "Bravo!" Worse, he repeated this crime a few days later at a performance of "Die Nixe von Schönbrunn." For several weeks, Madame Pichler ignored Schostal when he appeared at the stage door and walked home alone, tears in her beautiful Blue Danube eyes. "If a man cries 'Bravo!' for that creature, he's dead to me," she said.

Another Schostal favorite was Madame Grete Wiesenthal, the great danseuse and ballet teacher. After the dress rehearsal of the ballet "Der Tange nichts in Wien," with rather modern music by the Austrian composer Franz Salmhofer, Madame Wiesenthal called Schostal into her dressing room and asked him if he could manage a salvo of applause after her Glockentanz, an extremely delicate performance. Schostal studied the score, breathlessly watched by Madame Wiesenthal, Professor Alwin, the conductor, and Salmhofer, the composer. "Salmhofer would have rewritten the score especially for me," Schostal said later. "But I told him I thought it could be done."

That night we watched Schostal

closely as he followed Madame Wiesenthal's Glockentanz, the score in his hand. At the proper moment, he gave us the cue, a slight nod of his head, and we went to work. The ovation came off in great style. After the performance, which was an enormous success for Madame Wiesenthal, we all waited at the stage door for the usual final ovation. Somewhat in the background were a group of fifty slender boys and girls, students of Madame Wiesenthal's famous *Ballettschule*. As Madame Wiesenthal came out and stepped into her car, there was the usual ovation, "*Hoch Wiesenthal*," flawlessly executed by the entire *claque*. The car drove away slowly and Wiesenthal, a smile on her face, turned around and through the rear window beckoned to her pupils. This was, as we soon learned, a cue. The boys and girls took a deep



breath and a thundering "*Hoch Schostal! Bravo Schostal!*" went up into the Viennese night, shaking the waiters of the Opernrestaurant from their customary lethargy. They came running out of the dining room and Herr Bauer, the headwaiter, said to his piccolo, "Jessasmariundjosef. Now they're giving an ovation to Schostal himself. I always say nothing's impossible in this town." —JOSEPH WECHSBERG