

BEARDED BASSO COMES HOME

NINE years since he last delisted New Zealand audiences with his magnificent bass voice, and nearly 15 years after he left Auckland to study with Albert Garcia at Trinity College, London, Oscar Natzka has come back to sing again the songs everybody loves to hear him sing. Tall and impressive, his appearance made even more distinguished by a neatly-trimmed black beard, he was unusually charming as he talked to *The Listener* in his room at one of Wellington's five-star hotels.

That charm was only part of the evidence of how far he has travelled since the grim depression years when, at the age of 15, he used to swing a hammer for ten shillings a week in a blacksmith's shop at Freeman's Bay. He is now perhaps at the zenith of his career, a world figure amongst bassos, and both his hair and beard are streaked with grey. He has acquired, in 15 years of concert tours through England, America, Canada, South Africa and Australia, in his appearances at the Royal Covent Garden Opera House and New York's famed Metropolitan Opera, and in his wartime recitals to millions of Allied troops, a polished urbanity which contrasts with the more forthright Natzka of the '30's. He is no longer the supreme egoist who was ten years ago reported by a Sydney newspaper as having said, "I am regarded as one of the greatest bassos in the world to-day; you can compare me more than favourably with Chaliapin and Pinza." Or if he is, it isn't apparent while he talks to you. He may still think he is the world's best basso, but he doesn't go around telling everybody—perhaps he assumes that you already know it.

All Connoisseurs

So his first words were modestly enough of New Zealand and of how it feels to be back home again. About the country itself he felt just like any other local boy coming back after years abroad. "New Zealand is still the finest country in the world," he said. "I still feel that, after having been in practically every other country to compare it with." Musically, he was even more impressed. "Audiences here seem to have greatly improved in their appreciation of the finer classics of music—Brahms, Schubert, and so on. Everyone seems to be a connoisseur. When I was in Auckland they told me Auckland audiences were the toughest in New Zealand to please. They told me the same thing in Napier, and I got it again here in Wellington. I expect it will be the same in Christchurch and Dunedin too. Every town seems to pride itself on its knowledge of what is good music or good

singing and what isn't. So I was quite pleased when at Napier the theatre manager told me he had never known such enthusiasm in all his experience. I felt it wasn't uncritical appreciation, and that if you haven't got the goods you won't get the applause."

Nothing But Sing, Sing, Sing

Since his debut at Covent Garden (at the age of 26) it has been, as he remarked once in the course of the interview, "nothing but travel, travel, travel, and sing, sing, sing." But he has thrived on it. During the war he joined

something fantastic or exotic, you see, so it's become a regular part of me."

With the change in appearance brought about by his beard Natzka has also changed his name, again apparently to some extent for the benefit of the American public. Originally his name was spelt Natsche, then, in an attempt to approximate the correct pronunciation, as Natzke, and finally, within the last two years, as Natzka. His voice has changed too. As resonant as ever, it is curiously accented, at times rather like BBC English, at others revealing an unmistakable American drawl.

Garcia's Death

He mentioned that his teacher, Albert Garcia, had died while he was in London during the war.

"I was still in the navy then," he said. Garcia was reported to have a clot on the brain, and had just undergone a serious operation. He was due to coach me in an aria I was to sing one Sunday night at the Albert Hall, but he never gave me that lesson. He died suddenly on the Wednesday, and we buried him on the Saturday. He was a very great teacher, and his death was a great loss to the musical world, for there was no one to keep the name alive after him."

In discussing his plans for the future, Oscar Natzka revealed that he has recently signed a five-year contract with Alfred Judson, president of Columbia Concerts Corporation and probably America's biggest impresario. (Richard Farrell also has a contract with him.) He also has a contract to sing again with the New York City Opera Company, with whom he performed a month or two ago in the world premiere of the negro opera *Troubled Island*. For the present, he will continue after his New Zealand tour to Australia, Noumea, and Fiji, after which it is New York again, where he is booked to sing at the Met. in September.

Would he be back in New Zealand again soon? "No," he said, "I think it'll be a mighty long time before you see me out here again."

(Listeners to 3YA will be able to hear a broadcast of the second half of Oscar Natzka's concert in Christchurch at 9.0 p.m. on Wednesday, June 1.)



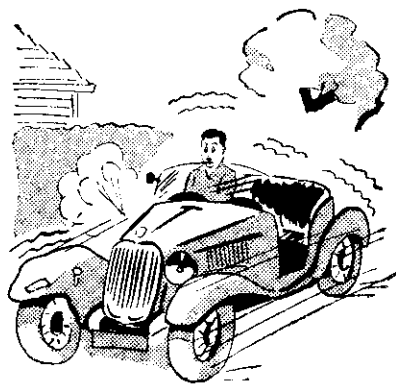
NATZKA (left) singing in the world premiere of the negro opera "Troubled Island" (by William Grant Still). With him is the Metropolitan Opera baritone Robert Weede

the Canadian Navy, and it was then that he grew his now famous beard.

"Like most wartime beards, it all started from a bet," he said. "I had a bet with a fellow officer as to who would shave off his beard first, and I won. In fact I won five pounds, and my beard hasn't come off yet. At first it was a great asset to me in the wartime show *Meet the Navy*, in which we entertained the troops for four years, including a command performance before the King and Queen in London and a film which has been shown, I believe, out here. Now I find my beard is just as great an asset in opera. As you know, most of the bass roles—Boris Godounov, Mephistopheles, and so on—are bearded. The ones that aren't like Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, I can now afford not to do. I've got enough operas without them."

"You'd be surprised how well it looks on the stage too. In *Eugen Onegin*, for instance, I had hardly any make-up on at all, and the critics said I looked a real aristocrat, the only real Russian prince on the stage. I can even play a man of 90 in it. And—well, it's saved me a whole lot of time, trouble, razor blades and soap. And also," he added, with a touch of the old ego and a burst of deep laughter, "I think the majority of the ladies like it. When you consider that I'm the only male singer in the United States with a beard, then from that point of view alone it's worth thousands of dollars to me in publicity. The Americans like something unusual,

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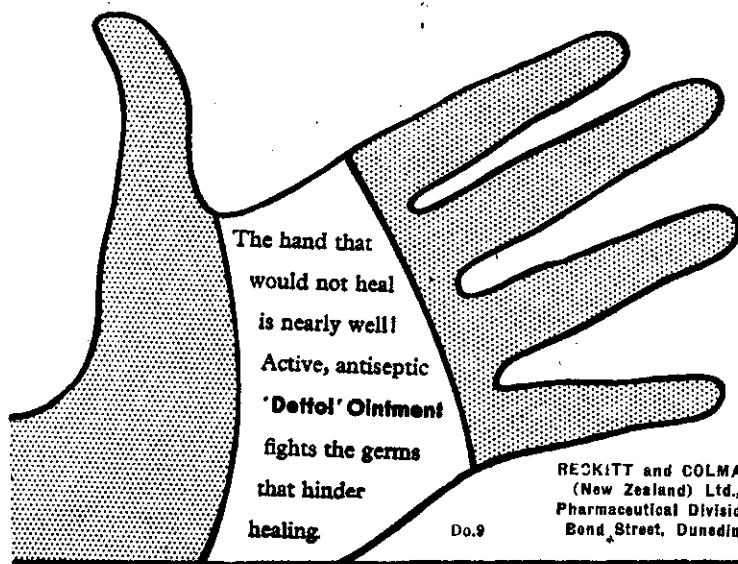
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