

Mother of the Free

SHORTLY before her death in 1946 Gertrude Stein completed the libretto of a specially-commissioned American opera called *The Mother of Us All*. The music was composed by Virgil Thomson, who had previously written a good deal of music to words by Gertrude Stein. In 1934 their first successful operatic collaboration had resulted in one of the most startling works ever to appear on the American stage. *Four Saints in Three Acts* was its title, and it was sung by a cast of Negroes in cellophane costumes. Although the music was highly praised, the libretto virtually made no sense to audiences who saw the work. It included the frequently-quoted

Let Lucy Lily Lily
Lucy Lucy let Lucy
Lucy Lily Lily Lily
Lily Lily let Lily
Lucy Lucy let Lily.
Let Lucy Lily.

The Mother of Us All, however, does not suffer from this inconvenience. It is a three-act chamber opera whose central figure is Susan B. Anthony, leader of the suffragette movement in 19th Century America, and the words have plenty of meaning. Recordings of *The Mother of Us All*, made by the American Department of State on the occasion of the first performance at the Columbia University Festival of 1947, have been lent to the NZBS. The opera will be broadcast from 2YA on three successive Sunday afternoons, starting at 2.0 p.m. this Sunday, September 4, with the Prologue and Act One.

Susan B. Anthony lived from 1820 to 1906, and devoted the greater part of her life to the fight for voting privileges for women and racial minorities. As a leader she attracted many women to her cause and succeeded, after a long struggle, in winning prominent statesmen to her point of view. The text of the opera is thoughtful, patriotic, compassionate, stern and witty, but although the theme is serious, there is plenty of humour in the work. Curiously enough the historical background is not strictly adhered to, and the *dramatis personae* includes both real and imaginary figures—Daniel Webster, Anthony Comstock, Lillian Russell, Ulysses S. Grant, and John Adams; and two minor characters called Gertrude S. and Virgil T.

Various episodes emerge: the entrance of the statesmen who sing that they are "members of the V.I.P., Very Important People, as you can see;" the wedding of Indiana Elliott, suffragette, and Jo the Loiterer, and poor Jo's ultimate concession to change his name to hers; the scenes in which Susan B. Anthony expresses her hope and her

despair; the waltzes with their flavour of the Naughty Nineties; the song in which the Negro man expresses his faith in the extension of suffrage; the concluding aria of the opera, in which Miss Anthony sums up her life-work in perspective.

One critic said that if the libretto had been as consistently good as the music, *The Mother of Us All* might be singled out as the best of all American operas, for the excellence of Virgil Thomson's musical treatment was beyond doubt. The directness and simplicity of the music are said to be so disarming that its subtlety and penetrating appropriateness are likely to be under-estimated. When the story is going well, the music never gets in its way, and when the going gets a bit sticky the music takes hold and propels the performance along into the next good passage of the libretto. The chief expressive force is in the melody, and except for

a few moments of dissonance the harmony consists mainly of the rudimentary common chords. Constant shifts of mood and intensity are produced by adroit and seemingly offhand changes of key, the voices are handled cleverly, and many of the melodies have a folk-like quality in keeping with the theme. Thomson himself is known as a composer, teacher, organist and critic, and is at present music critic for the New York *Herald Tribune*.

The famous Stein idiom is strongly evident in the opera, and much of the story discusses the nature of man with considerable insight. Stress is laid on Susan B. Anthony's perplexity—she wanted all women to be equal to men, but after she had gained her point, was not sure she had been right in the first place. To quote the text, "A hen screams frightfully when she sees an eagle, but she is only afraid for her children, men are afraid for themselves, that is the real difference between men and women. Yet some day the women will vote and by that time it will do them no good because having the vote they will become like men, they will be afraid, having the vote will make them afraid." This opera was Gertrude Stein's last completed work.

Formers' Sessions

SLIGHT changes have been made in the nature of the farmers' sessions broadcast by 1YA. The mid-day session *Country Journal*, which follows the 12.30 news every Tuesday, will in future be designed essentially for the farmer and his family and will include a feature item. For the *Farmer*, which is broadcast every Wednesday at 7.0 p.m., will be devoted to actual farm topics and problems.



GERTRUDE STEIN
The words have plenty of meaning



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