

SMITHY TO COVENT GARDEN

Oscar Natzke's is a Success Story

When he was young, Oscar Natzke worked hard in a blacksmith's shop at Freeman's Bay, Auckland, then he got his big chance and went to the Trinity College of Music, London, where he worked even harder, cramming about ten years' tuition into three years. And he made a job of it, more than justifying the confidence of those who helped him, for he was the first singer to go direct from a college of music to a leading part at Covent Garden, and the youngest bass ever to sing in that great opera-house.

THE story of Oscar Natzke's rise to fame as New Zealand's first world-ranking bass singer is a story of determination and hard work and of what can be accomplished by native talent when it is given the opportunity to prove itself through expert tuition. He could hardly himself have dreamed, a few short years ago, of what lay ahead of him. He had appeared occasionally at Auckland concerts then, but his real work was in the clamour of the smithy.

His father was a Russian who took up farming here, and his mother was born in Christchurch, of English stock, but when he was only a lad of 15 his father died and the young Natzke became a breadwinner, being apprenticed to a blacksmith for 10s a week. One of the first calls he paid on returning to Auckland a fortnight ago was to his old employer, at present an inmate of Auckland Hospital.

To start with, he found blacksmithing and swinging a 14lb. hammer heavy going—it almost killed him at first—but in time it endowed him with the great lung-power which every singer needs.

Russian Bass Type

When Natzke was about 18 his voice broke and he began to develop a basso-profundo of great power, which Galli-Curci described as a Russian counter-bass, a type for which Russia is noted. At this time he also sang in a number of concerts at Auckland, and at one of them he was heard by Anderson Tyrer, who cabled to Trinity College of Music asking that a special scholarship be granted to young Natzke. To this the College agreed, and a number of enthusiasts in New Zealand materially assisted by financing all expenses over and above the scholarship. The rest depended on the singer himself.

Deflation

Natzke landed in London in March, 1935, and began his studies with Albert Garcia. To Garcia, son and grandson of famous teachers (his grandfather taught Jenny Lind), Oscar Natzke says he owes most of all, and the first lesson was one of the most important.

"It was when I first went to the college," said Oscar Natzke. "Albert asked me to sing up and down the scale, so I thought I'd give him something to listen to. I had a pretty big voice in these days, coming straight from the forge, so I just threw my chest out and let him have it, until I thought the walls would surely start to crumble. When I finished he looked at me, 'We-ell,' he said, 'we may be able to make something of it in about ten years.' . . ."

"That was one of the greatest lessons I ever had from him," added Natzke. "I felt at the time that I must have no voice at all and that sending me all the way from New Zealand had been an elaborate kind of joke. Later on, Garcia told me that I seemed so full of myself that he felt he had to do it then

and there. Between us, however, there was never the atmosphere of master and pupil, with its attendant tension. He worked with me."

Singing to the Soldiers

After singing at Covent Garden in Lloyd's new opera "The Serf," in "Faust," "Rigoletto" and "Die Meistersingers," Natzke came under the direction of the impresario, Harold Holt, giving celebrity concerts in company with other artists throughout England.

Not less memorable to him than his Covent Garden appearances were the soldiers' concerts at which he sang before leaving England.

"If you can please the troops you can please anyone," he said. "To them you're just an entertainer, whether you've sung at Covent Garden or not, and if they don't like you they'll tell you so without wasting words. They won't wait until after the concert and write you a letter, and as like as not they'll have a few fights among themselves during the concert about what you are to be asked to sing."

The Stuff They Gave the Troops

Yet, one of these concerts he would always remember as having included the greatest array of talent with which he had been associated on the platform. The men in camp had specially asked for "a real highbrow show," and they certainly got it. The hall was a large tin shed, but the men had rigged up a stage and manhandled an excellent grand piano on to it, and curtained off a small space for a dressing-room. The artists included, besides himself, Eva Turner, Ida Handel, the 16-year-old violinist whom Kreisler had described as the greatest prodigy he had ever listened to, Hubert Greenslade as accompanist, and Eileen Joyce.

Eileen Joyce started off with compositions by Brahms, Chopin and Bach, Ida Handel played "Scherzo Tarantelle," Eva Turner sang the great aria from "Aida," which she had sung at the Royal Covent Garden season some time before, and then sang excerpts from "Tannhauser." Natzke himself sang arias from "The Barber of Seville," "The Magic Flute," and finished with "I Have Attained the Power," from "Boris Godounov."

Discriminating Audience

"After that," Oscar Natzke went on, "there was a 15-minute interval and more classics and lieder followed. Eileen Joyce played a sonata that must have lasted about 45 minutes and the troops took it all and looked for more. And the remarkable thing is that no musical organisation in England could have afforded to engage these artists for the same show in peacetime. It was a superlative entertainment and the least discriminating of the troops realised that. They just lapped it up."

Musical Preferences

With his training and his experience at Covent Garden, it is natural that Oscar Natzke should prefer grand opera to other musical forms, and his favourite operas are Moussorgsky's "Boris Godounov" and Boito's "Mephisto," both works which the great Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin made famous in England. On the other hand, when he is a listener



OSCAR NATZKE

and not on the stage, his favourites are "Aida" and the "Marriage of Figaro." His favourite composer for the voice is Verdi—as he explained, Verdi wrote for the voice, especially for the bass, and his bass arias, when properly sung, are superb.

On the subject of grand opera, he drew an interesting contrast between Albert Coates and Sir Thomas Beecham. The former, and John Barbirolli, he said, were the best conductors he had ever sung with. There was no question of the greatness of Sir Thomas Beecham, but he got more from his orchestras than from his singers. The reverse was the case with Coates and Barbirolli, they gave most of their attention to the singer.

Recalling that Richard Tauber was a first-class conductor, as well as a great singer, Natzke mentioned that Tauber was one of the very few great singers who could score their own parts for orchestra. So far, Oscar Natzke has not sung with Toscanini, but that is a privilege which he hopes may come his way when he reaches New York. He is to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House after his tours of Australia and South Africa.

New Zealand Talent

Meantime, however, he is back among his own people. He received a warm welcome back from his old work-mates when he visited them in Auckland, and now he is awaiting New Zealand's verdict on his singing. He is first and foremost a New Zealander, and always makes a point of having the words "New Zealand bass" included in his gramophone titles, as part of his own campaign to secure recognition for his Dominion in fields other than those given over to the production of mutton, butter and cheese. He is sure that there is the talent in New Zealand, if it can only enjoy the chance he was given. He acknowledges freely that without help he could not have got very far. First he is indebted to Anderson Tyrer for getting him a scholarship, but essential financial assistance was also provided by New Zealand musical enthusiasts, and success was ensured by the quality of the tuition given him by Albert Garcia.

"Every day, and sometimes twice a day, Sundays included," he said, "I had a lesson from him, and you should have seen me doing harmony, sometimes until four in the morning, when I first arrived at Trinity College."

The real secret of Oscar Natzke's success can be deduced from that sentence.

Oscar Natzke will sing from 2YA Wellington at 8.30 p.m. on Sunday, March 24, at 9.25 p.m. on Tuesday, March 26, and at 9.25 p.m. on Thursday, March 28.