

THE ART OF OPERA

"TEMPERAMENT in opera is an over-blown legend," Joan Cross stated emphatically. "We have one very temperamental singer, but opera is such an important profession that temperament plays a very small part; it's mostly hard work. In the old days temperament was accepted as part of a prima donna's makeup, but it's not a good thing, and I see no reason for it. It only upsets everyone—including the singer."

If temperament is not a desirable attribute for a singer, Miss Cross could

of hers, and she finds they work well together. "He has a tremendous sense of drama, of theatre and stage," she said. "He never puts a foot wrong in his writing for the stage, which is truly remarkable. Many composers can write magnificent music without having a true sense of dramatic situation. Their scenes just don't build up into a climax; there's too much music or too little. Strauss was an excellent stage writer, and Puccini infallible." She has less confidence in the consideration some modern composers have for the singers' voices, and finds their works are not good for young or inexperienced singers.

The post-war years in Britain have seen a creation of a native opera tradition. "There has been a great upsurge of British work," she said, "and native singers do very well in the roles, which they find no more difficult than those of any other modern composition. Cressida was sung by an overseas artist, but singers like Arda Mandikian, Elsie Morison, Sylvia Fisher, Jennifer Vyvyan, Richard Lewis, Peter Pears, and many others, are quite at home in the English operas. Sadler's Wells is an absolutely native effort, and Covent Garden has a resident English company, the backbone of opera there. Every so often we import a great overseas singer, which is very interesting for all concerned. Of course they should be world-famous voices."

Miss Cross admitted she loved travelling, saying that recently she had worked out that she had done some 70,000

miles since 1953. This visit was a very brief one, arranged at a moment's notice. It began when some of her students from New Zealand said to her, "What a pity you can't go to New Zealand," and she replied, "I'd go if they asked me." Her willingness was reported in the right places, and she came.

She has heard as many singers as possible while here, and selected groups who should sing with her personal tuition in front of other singers and interested people. In Auckland the audience built up until on the last night the hall was completely filled. This she found very satisfactory. "I found some very good voices," she said. "It's a pity they can't give more time to singing. Having to work all day to earn a living makes it very hard to develop a voice properly."

Indeed, one of the few things that aroused Miss Cross's anger was the acceptance by so many singers of a situation which they claimed made it necessary for them to go overseas or teach, or get married if a girl. She feels that Europe is over-populated anyway, and that New Zealand is no longer a pioneering country—or at least that it is a country in need of a new kind of pioneer.

"Even if it takes 15 or 20 years, opera and ballet companies can be established," she claims, "and it should be possible for singers to earn a living here. My visit has been interesting, stimulating, and highly enjoyable, but I would like to feel that my work and advice was leading to something more than these amateur shows, good as they are."



JOAN CROSS *Spencer Digby photo*

"It should be possible for singers to earn a living here"

name enough other qualities necessary. Joint principal of the School of Opera in London, she had been conducting master classes in Auckland and Wellington for the New Zealand Opera Company. She has found that an opera singer, to be a success, needs a strong voice, even if it is light in tone, the constitution of an ox, the patience of Job, great equanimity of temper, and then persistence and a determination to get on in the profession. "And an acting ability is a help too," she conceded. "Opera has a curious magnetic attraction. In its fusion of the arts there is a great intensification of emotion. The opera devotee must be an immensely excitable person, being so roused by the effect of the human voice in conjunction with the whole orchestra."

Of her own roles, Miss Cross spoke of the part of Queen Elizabeth in the Benjamin Britten opera *Gloriana*, performed for the Coronation.

"It's a wonderful opera," she said, "and the part of *Gloriana* is a tremendous challenge, being a great acting role, as well as a singing one. I had eight changes of costume and wig. I thoroughly enjoyed the part, and it was fascinating to impersonate the first Queen Elizabeth. I have a feeling the *Gloriana* will come back some day and be regarded as one of Britten's greatest successes."

She has been in on the first nights of five of Britten's operas, *Peter Grimes*, *Albert Herring*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Gloriana* and *The Turn of the Screw*. The composer has become a great friend



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