

Big Stars' Small Beginnings

LIFE STORIES OF GRACE MOORE AND CONCHITA SUPERVIA, OPERA FAVOURITES.

THE marriage of the words "coloratura" and "soprano" has received the blessing of continual usage, says the "Radio Times," London. The partnership is not inviolable, however. A notable instance of a divorce occurs in Conchita Supervia's voice, which is approximately coloratura contralto. Only approximately, for more accurately it should be termed coloratura contralto-mezzo-soprano.

All those charming but exacting florid roles of the earlier Italian operas she fills with superb ease. At La Scala in Milan, for instance, Conchita Supervia was responsible for the resurrection of several operas of Rossini and others that had been unheard for over 40 years, mainly through the lack of coloratura contraltos capable of singing them.

Already this season Conchita Supervia has shown the Covent Garden audience how her voice can master the many vocal difficulties of La Cenerentola. Last month she played the name part in the broadcast performance of "Carmen." It is her favourite role. Not surprisingly, for it gives every opportunity to make use of her rich voice and radiant personality. It was as Carmen, incidentally, that she sang with enormous success at the inaugural performance in 1932 for the re-opening of the Opera Comique in Paris.

Her radio debut was made in 1930, when she was the vocalist at a B.B.C. concert of Spanish music. Although long highly esteemed on the Continent and in America, Conchita Supervia had been comparatively unknown in Britain until that introductory broadcast.

Her voice is particularly sympathetic to the interpretation of Spanish national songs. Which is as it should be, for she was born in Barcelona of an old Andalusian family, and at an early age was dispatched to a convent where part of her education consisted of playing traditional Spanish music on the piano. When she was five she was a small but important member of a church choir. And—an even more amusing example of precocity—at the age of seven she was the prima donna in an operetta based on the Red Riding Hood fairy tale.

Her serious career, however, really began when she was 14. A mere school-girl, she was chosen by the great Richard Strauss himself to play in "Rosenkavalier" at the Royal Opera in Rome. Not long after, she was to be seen and heard at La Scala in Milan, where she sang under Toscanini and other famous conductors. Since then, of course, Conchita Supervia has become famous in all the important music centres of both Europe and America.



Grace Moore as she appeared in "One Night of Love," the film in which she established an enviable screen reputation.

The salient feature of Conchita Supervia's early progress is the fact that at no time did she undergo anything in the way of vocal training as we understand it. She studied under no particular teacher and at no particular college. Instead, her voice was schooled at public performances and rehearsals on the stage and concert platform; and amongst her unofficial tutors were some of the greatest conductors in Europe. An unorthodox start, indeed, to a fine operatic career.

LAST month there was another singer at Covent Garden whose history is unusual, to say the least. She played the Mimi of Puccini's "La Boheme." Her name is Grace Moore and she comes to us with a big reputation from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Nevertheless, she is hardly a stranger, for we have been introduced to her previously through the medium of three films. The first production, shown in 1930, and piquantly and inaptly entitled "A Lady's Morals," purported to portray the life of Jenny Lind; then followed "New Moon," which featured her with Lawrence Tibbett; and the third, "One Night of Love," depicted her as a cafe-concert artist who rose to become an international celebrity as a prima donna.

The last-named film, "One Night of Love," was a great success from both the artistic and box-office standpoints. The recording was faultless, and thousands of cinemagoers on this side of the Atlantic were impressed by the peculiarly graceful charm of Grace Moore's voice and personality. The interest of the film was enhanced, moreover, by the knowledge that its plot of the cabaret singer rising to operatic fame roughly coincided with Grace Moore's actual life story.

A banker's daughter, she was born in Del Rio, Tennessee. As a child she became closely associated with church work, taught a Sunday school class, and led a choir. Her earliest ambition was to become a missionary in China, but this project she abandoned after hear-

ing a song recital given by Mary Garden.

A short period at a music school near Washington and then her family suddenly decided that singing was far more satisfactory as a pastime than as a profession. Grace Moore, unable to see the wisdom of this sentiment, packed her bag and ran away from home to New York. It was here that she sang in a cafe in return for board and expenses. The year 1922 was the turning point. A theatrical producer took an interest in her, and she understudied the lead in a musical comedy that went by the rather unedifying name of "Hitchy Koo." The inevitable happened, of course; the principal fell ill, and understudy Grace Moore filled the part admirably.

Her success in musical comedy and revue enabled her to study in Paris. Later, a short sojourn in Italy led to a meeting with Mary Garden—the singer, you remember, who years before had made Grace Moore forsake her missionary aspirations. A course of study was advised and taken, and it was not long before she was singing Mimi in "La Boheme" at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. This was in 1928.

Since then she has won her way steadily to the first rank of operatic artists. With the Metropolitan Company she has delighted the critics with her performances in "Faust," "Romeo and Juliet," "Manon," "Pagliacci," "La Boheme," and "Tales of Hoffmann." After her second season she left America temporarily to make a well-received European tour, during which she appeared in Paris, Cannes, and Monte Carlo.

Like Conchita Supervia, Grace Moore has both good looks and acting ability. Again like Conchita Supervia, she has a voice that compares favourably with that of any of the great figures of past and contemporary operatic history. We should be thankful. Vocal charm is all too rarely the handmaiden of personal charm.