

The Lighter Side of Opera

One of the most interesting figures in the New Zealand musical world is Harison Cook, well-known in Wellington as an operatic bass and teacher of music. On Easter Monday evening he will present a recital from 2YA. In the accompanying article a brief outline is given of his varied career, and in conclusion he relates several amusing incidents which occurred during his wanderings with different operatic companies.

TO be a doctor was once Harison Cook's sole ambition, and to that end he studied medicine for over six years. The call of the stage proved too strong, however, and he gave up his medical career to throw himself wholeheartedly into an extensive study of voice culture and music, under the late Hugo Beyer. He has never regretted it.

His career has been both brilliant and varied, as the following resume shows. He first appeared on the professional stage in comic opera in 1906, while in 1910 he made his debut in grand opera at the Denhof Operatic Festival. For three years or so he toured various operatic circuits on the Continent, and then in 1914 he sang at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, London—a distinction which he shares with only one other New Zealander. He was then to have appeared at the Stuttgart Opera House, but war broke out, and he joined the artillery.

Following demobilisation, he became principal bass and stage director of the celebrated Carl Rosa Opera Company, and for seven years toured Great Britain. His most valuable operatic training was gained, however, when engaged as principal bass with the Moody Manners Operatic Company, under Charles Manners.

He has sung nearly ninety different bass roles, and has produced over sixty different operas, grand and comic.

A PART from his reputation as an operatic basso, he was well known throughout Great Britain and Ireland as a concert and ballad singer, and many songs, including "The Arguing Wife," which incidentally he is singing from 2YA on Easter Monday night, were specially written for him by the composers.

While talking with the writer he mentioned among other things several amusing experiences which occurred while he was touring with different opera companies. These he relates below. Despite its pomp and dignity, grand opera certainly has its lighter side.

"Well, I'm afraid I cannot tell you much of my views or experiences of broadcasting, for I haven't come into contact with it much at all. In fact, my broadcast next Monday night will be the second occasion on which I

have appeared before a studio microphone. I have often sung over the air before, but, with one exception, only during concert relays.

"I can tell you, however, of some very amusing little incidents which happened during my wanderings with opera companies.

"THE first occurred when I was with the Carl Rosa Opera Company. We were staying at a little town in Wales at the time, and were to present 'Lohengrin' at the local opera house.

"In 'Lohengrin' the curtain for the second act rises upon an imposing flight of steps, complete with balustrades, leading up to an equally ornate building. At the foot of the balustrades are two small pillars, one on each side.

"Well, on the opening night the property master discovered that one of these pillars was missing—lost in transport, probably—and he hit upon the idea of using as a substitute an empty beer-barrel covered with white linen. This he did, and the beer-barrel was duly lifted into place. Unfortunately, as subsequent events revealed, the open end was uppermost. However, it looked very imposing.

"In due course the curtain rose before a hushed and expectant house. The tenor was revealed standing in a dramatic attitude facing the soprano, who was daintily seated on the edge of the disguised beer-barrel. 'The dawn is breaking. Let us away'—or words to that effect—sang the tenor. 'I cannot flee; some spell holds me enchained,' replied the soprano, and with these words she stretched her arm upon which she was sitting, gave way, and she fell backward into the barrel. All that was visible of her was a pair of wildly waving feet. The house collapsed.

"Another time we were producing 'Il Trovatore' at a little town in the north of England. At the conclusion of the second act of this opera, the tenor and baritone are engaged in a sword duel, and the soprano rushes in to stop the fight. Then the curtain falls.

"Well, everything was going splendidly. The baritone and tenor were duly hacking away at each other with gusto, their swords clashing and glittering. The house was tense



Harison Cook.

and still, watching the fight with bated breath. In rushed the soprano to stop the duel. The curtain began to fall. Then, to the horror of those standing in the wings, the baritone was seen to rise bodily in the air, arms waving and legs kicking. His cloak had become entangled in the curtain mechanism, and there he was, suspended between heaven and earth, dignity gone, looking very like a horse suspended by a loading sling. I always remember it as the only time the fight was won.

"The third and last of these catastrophes I can call to mind at the moment took place when we were producing 'Maritana'—I think we were in Birmingham at the time. In this opera the bass takes the part of the King of Spain, who in the first act appears only once, and after one sentence disappears for 102 minutes. I know the exact time, because I played the part myself once.

TO continue the story. In due course the King appeared, resplendent in laces and a broad-brimmed black hat, covering a mass of long, shining 'Charles I' curls, which flowed down over his shoulders. He spoke his part and disappeared to his dressing-room. Here he removed his hat and wig, put on a dressing-gown and became immersed in a book, waiting for his next cue.

"As it happened, the call-boy was late, and when he did appear, breathless in the doorway, the 'King' seized his hat and fled in a very unkingly manner stageward. All eyes were upon him as he stalked majestically up to the Queen and swept his plumed hat off gracefully as he bowed to. (Continued on page 2.)