

"BITTER SWEET" TRIUMPH

Ambition Gets Its Reward

By ETHELIND FEARON

THE Chelmsford Amateur Operatic Society are doing Noel Coward's "Bitter Sweet" this week and, ambitious though it is, with a colossal cast, are doing it extremely well. Miss Mavis Ward (connected with British Operatics) produces, and the full orchestra is under the direction of Charles Hambourg—a cousin of the famous pianist and a frequent conductor of orchestras in Germany—but it was the players who most rivetted our attention.

Promptly at 7.30 the orchestra sailed into the haunting theme song, "I'll see you again"; the Marchioness of Shane (née Sarah Millick, and played by Dorothy Cox, of whom Chelmsford may be justly proud) as an old lady, opened the show by persuading a young friend to elope with a dance band leader (Bert Barneveld) and hang the consequences, and the rest of the evening was a dash back to the old lady's earlier life, approximately on these lines:

Sarah is about to marry the harmless, respectable Hon. Hugh Devon, respectably acting by Edward Foulsham, when she and her music master fall mutually in love and elope to Vienna, where they are both employed in a cafe. Sarah is perhaps a trifle virtuous and English for this particular environment. An elegant Austrian officer kisses her (yes, but you must remember that it was two o'clock in the morning and Vienna) and her husband, to save her from more—ah, worse—challenges the officer to a duel and is neatly skewered by a long, sharp sword. He expires in song, agony and the arms of his wife, while Manon (the Other Woman, and played by Helen Aldridge) waits her loss. Sarah comes home fifteen years later and accepts the Marquis of Shane's invitation to exchange Viennese night life for a chair in the park watching the leaves come down. We leave her where we found her, an ancient (and, of course, more experienced) aristocrat in black lace, being at once a warning and an encouragement to future generations of bilingual lovers.

UNDER A SPELL

Sarah had a beautiful voice, strong, full and clear, and when the male lead, Carl Linden, the music master (in the person of Dick Glanville) first spoke he put us under a spell which lasted the evening. His is the real professional touch. I hear that he has played for the Stock Exchange and other well known Dramatic Societies, and his voice came over the footlights with every word round and poised like a ball which he threw to the back of the circle and caught on the rebound. The Victorian costumes were delicious, especially the ball dresses, and the Hon. Hugh so utterly vacuous and empty-headed that everyone was enchanted with his inanities—even the "limes" man, who, from where I sat was obliquely visible, framed in a little dark window high up in the wings. He bathed the singers with gold or violet light according to the demands of their song and beamed delight and approval, like a benevolent cherub, on all the best lines.

Sarah's cousins and the lady guests (who with their male escorts made a grand chorus) were all pretty and provocative, like clustered Dresden china shepherdesses, and sang their tuneful numbers so well that I suspect some of them of being soloists in their own right. Charles Hambourg conducted with almost pneumatic energy; a procession of footmen, graded in order of height, was the funniest thing I have seen for a long time, and then we had the Elopement to a background of blue moonlight on the terrace and the haunting strains of the theme song again.

The normal cold and empty deadness of Monday nights had been ingeniously overcome and the house was packed, warm and very much alive to the good things being presented before it. Act I took us to Vienna, where the polkas of Grosvenor Square had become waltzes, and four squabbling and bustled ladies of the town (Jean Ringer, Pat Smith, Marjorie Cowell and Eileen Roden) gave a scintillating performance. The girl with a diamond garter and buttoned boots, not to mention a vivaciously wagging behind and coyly swivelling eyes, was as good as the Frenchwoman in "Bless the Bride," and a comic waiter (Fred Munnion), wandered in and out with flat feet and innumerable glasses of stage coffee. The cafe band, in ancient bowlers and false moustaches, fiddled like mad Viennese captains flirted and the cafe ladies gave the scene a dash of La Boheme, only their tiny hands were never frozen because the officers were always holding one while they drank wine with the other.

Then the dancing master's Past, in the form of the charming Manon, entered, and had us all in the hollow of her expressive hand. Her first song, "I believe in doing what I can, in crying when I must and laughing when I choose," was one of the finest things I ever heard in any amateur production but I understand that she has had much experience in American stock companies and in repertory, which may, perhaps, account for her golden voice, so perfectly trained and exquisitely modulated. She sang the little wistful number with such pathos that the whole theatre stopped breathing to listen, then threw herself into such a tantrum that we all but took cover under the seats, and when her exit door jammed she had sufficient presence of mind to gag and go off by the wings.

WELL DRILLED

The Pravda girls danced a rollicking can-can. Donald Leech was a dashing monocled and cloaked officer, and J. P. Michael a funny little moustache-twirling cafe proprietor, while the entire cast, in "Tokay" sang the virtues of wine, women and song (or perhaps they were warning us) to terrific applause. They were remarkably well drilled—especially considering that it had only been tried once on the stage, at the final dress rehearsal. And though the subtle semitones of Coward's music aren't easy, the singers had been so well rehearsed that they were note perfect, even in songs where, to the untrained ear, any note would have done as well as any other note. But the honours in this round, all things considered, went to Helen Aldridge's "Manon," whether she was ringing our hearts with Coward's occasional philosophies or singing a French cafe song (very French) in black net tights and a few wisps of nothing much, arranged in a sort of pedish frill round the middle. She gave us, in fact, an exquisite parody of Mistinguette, who can look more like a hen ostrich prooting round a Whipsnade paddock looking for its mate, than any human being I know. The "limes" man almost fell out of his window trying to catch every word and every gesture, and I can foresee a lot of people brushing up their French and going back for a further instalment later in the week.

It was all very good musical comedy. More musical and less comedy than some, perhaps, but that is the Coward touch, and how we loved it. Sarah returned (in ravishing sequinned satin with a background of "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay" just to give the authentic fin-de-siècle touch) and there was a sublimely suave male quartette

"Pretty Boys"—typical Coward at his most phosphorescent, and for sheer wicked wit and professional polish the best thing in the show. Their Grecian frieze was glorious, their make-up a macabre miracle and their wordless exit a peerless piece of buffoonery. Sarah sang "Zigeuner" to Douglas Catt's exquisite accompaniment; Carl's spirit, like an invisible choir, sang from a box—yes, you've guessed it—"I'll see you again"; Sarah, now older and sadder but nowise impaired in voice, echoed it from the stage, and the curtain fell, to crashing and prolonged applause.

THE COMPLETE CAST

Dr. John Taylor, acting president of the Society, wound up the proceedings with his usual witty little speech and the newspaper people dashed off to write up their copy while luckier folk stood about the pavement in long frocks and furs to discuss the distinguished performance. But I had better give you a list of the performers. They were:—

The Marchioness of Shayne (Sarah Millick), Dorothy Cox, Carl Linden, Dick Glanville, Manon, Helen Aldridge, Dolly Chamberlain, Ann Massey, Lord Henry Jekyll, George R. Wade, The Hon. Hugh Devon, Edward L. Foulsham, Mrs. Millick, Mary Leech, Sir Arthur Fenchurch, Frank Page, Herr Schlick, J. P. Michael, Lady Devon, Peggy Welham, The Marquis of Shane, Jim Welham, Vincent Howard, Bert Barneveld, Lord Edgar James (Ella Brigade Officer), Reg Cornell, Lord Sorrel (Artillery officer), Douglas Catt, Mr. Vale (Naval officer), Cyril Davey.

Mr. Bethel, Kenneth Fox; Mr. Prontio, Sidney Collicott; Victoria, Amy Warren; Harriet, June Gatsby; Gloria, Vera Stock; Honor, Margare Cocker; Jane, Rosemary Gornall; Effie, Jane Andrews; Gussie, Jean Ringer; Lotte, Pat Smith; Freda, Marjorie Cowell; Hansi, Eileen Roden; Lieutenant Tranisch, Jim Welham.

Captain August Lutte, Donald Leech; Marquis of Shayne, Donald Leech; Nita, Beryl Keable; Helen, Norah Taylor; Jackie, Beryl Hookley; Mrs. Devon, Norah Taylor; Vernon Craft, Kenneth Fox; Lord Henry Jade, Sidney Collicott; Cedric Ballantyne, Jim Welham; Bertram Sellick, Reg Cornell; Parker (Butler, Act I, Scene I), W. A. T. Rondel; Hurley (Butler, Act III, Scene I), W. A. T. Rondel; Accompanist (Butler, Act III, Scene I), Douglas Catt; Singer (Act I, Scene I), Reg Cornell; Fritz (a waiter), Fred Munnion.

Prater girls, June Gatsby, Margare Summers, Betty Wager, Kathleen Amery, Diane Lawson, Cecily Harris; footmen, W. A. T. Rondel; Tom Taylor, H. Heisterman, Edward L. Foulsham; musicians (dance band), Bert Barneveld, Bob Ashall, Reg. Chalmers (cafe band), Bert Barneveld, W. H. Bateman, Fred Hart; waiters, Stanley Parsons, Tom Taylor, W. A. T. Rondel, H. Heisterman, Peter Smith, George R. Wade; cleaners, Betty Wager, Margare Summers, Diane Lawson, Cecily Harris, Kathleen Amery, Nora Taylor, Margery Clark; charwomen, Yvonne Flood, Beryl Keable; guests, Margery Clark, Diane Lawson, Margare Summers, Betty Wager, Cecily Harris, Kathleen Amery, Yvonne Flood, Beryl Keable, June Skippen, Peggy Welham, Peggy Mitten, Amy Warren, June Gatsby, Jean Ringer, Pat Smith, Marjorie Cowell, Eileen Roden; customers, Reg. Cornell, W. A. T. Rondel, Tom Taylor, Edward L. Foulsham, Sidney Collicott, Douglas Catt, Kenneth Fox, Cyril L. Davey, Stanley Parsons, Peter Smith, Heisterman.