DELIGHT IN THE THEATRE

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OF *Four Saints in Three Acts,* Stark Young has justly said that it gives delight, which is one of the rarest experiences in the theatre. It is the same quality of delight which I found in the Monte Carlo's production of *Concurrence*—both of these having a mingling of many arts to which, as if by accident, the opera has added the words of Gertrude Stein. For the purposes of publicity, emphasis on these words was natural enough but they remain what all librettos for opera always are—sounds to be sung while more important esthetic events transpire on the stage. Unlike most words for opera, they carry, from time to time, a charge of emotion, and the great difficulty of Miss Stein's method is that she interferes with the very emotion she creates, because we, the listeners, are unable to perform the miracle which she herself has performed of separating ordinary English words from their ordinary denotations.

I quote the words sung when the magnificent funeral cortege —positively Shakespearean in the poetic trappings of woe— appears: "With wed led said with led dead said with dead led said with said dead led wed said wed dead led dead led said wed. With be there all their all their time there be there vine there be vine time there be there time there all their time there." This, to Mr. Thomson's impressive music, is entirely successful—the words are syllables of sound; but some of the experiments are not so happy, such as the famous "The envelopes are on all the fruit of the fruit trees." There are scenes which are between these extremes. The Commere and the Compere for instance, have a dialogue which Mr. Thomson has delightfully set as a love duet, words and music reminding you of a children's count-

ing song: "One-two, button my shoe; three-four, shut the door; five-six, pick up sticks; seven-eight, lay them straight," etc.

"*Compere*: Scene eight.
Commere: To wait.
Compere: Scene one.
Commere: And begun.
Compere: Scene two.
Commere: To and to.
Compere: Scene three.
Commere: Happily be.
Compere: Scene Four.
Commere: Attached or.
Compere: Scene Five.
Commere: Sent to derive.
Compere: Scene Six.
Commere: Let it mix.
Compere: Scene Seven.
Commere: Attached eleven.
Compere: Scene Eight.
Commere: To wait."

In places again, the words intentionally create a sense of farce as when the two Saints Therese appear together and the Compere remarks casually: "St. Therese with St. Therese," and as if this has not been clear says much more emphatically and still as if explaining the obvious: "St. Therese *and* St. Therese."

I am unable to say how far the libretto itself creates the emotional drama which one has seen on the stage. Miss Stein has used syllables miraculously, with the effect of syncopation and even of counterpoint, as in the lovely scene of "Pigeons on the grass alas," which ends with the off-stage chant, brief and fragrant, "Let Lucy Lily Lily Lucy Lucy let Lucy Lucy Lily Lily Lily Lily Lily let Lily Lucy Lucy let Lily. Let Lucy Lily." But I don't think this is true for the libretto in every page. Yet if anyone should wish to belittle the text on this ground, the warning is quite clear. This is "an opera to be sung." I found myself wishing from time to time that I could hear the words more clearly.

I think that with this I am done with reservations. The work

was produced with a great sense of style, beginning with Miss Florine Stettheimer's settings made of lace and cellophane, and looking like a child's dream of rock candy, and continuing through the costumes and choreography, the lights and all the other elements involved. I am not sure that I know always whether proper credit should go to Maurice Grosser, who prepared the scenario, or to John Houseman, who was producer, or to the author or the composer for some of the stage business which was so enchanting — the sailors with the net, for instance. I don't find in the printed text any indication of what the action is to be, yet the action as it progressed seemed always proper, even when it was trifling. And it seemed to carry a sense of climax which, in the scene of the funeral, was magnificent. How a sense of grandeur was begotten out of this material, I do not know, but it was there and there was something authentic behind all the play which gave a sudden stab of remembered pain. Ignatius was, after all, a martyr: "I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Entice the wild beasts that they may become my sepulchre."

This note of the authentic, which is grave and almost solemn, comes in a production which is thoroughly gay—you felt at times that an operetta of Gilbert and Sullivan's, sung in Latin, would be something like this. The source of its power, first over special audiences and now over general ones, is that it has life. It is not too thoughtful. Mr. Thomson's music is charming in its parodies, especially on modern popular songs and negro spirituals, and interesting, if not really absorbing, in its more ambitious reaches. Actually, by suggesting other music in his parodies, he has associated sense to some of Miss Stein's words and so to a degree defeated her object, which is, I suppose, to dissociate meaning in order to create "either an outer or inner reality." You might say the same of some of the dances which were, let us say, too easily recognized, but the fantasy of the lights, the costumes and the settings were all there to set free the mind. To this, the singing and the movements of the negroes who were principals and chorus, were a great addition. The voices were clear, the sounds seemed to rise as pure music, and the move-

ments across the stage had a beautiful flow and unstudied ease. I was puzzled at moments by the hostility which seemed to exist between the Compere and the Commere who, in my opinion, interfered too often into the action and who, it happens, were the only players to betray any sense of taking part in a joke. The perfect representation, it seemed to me, was that of Edward Matthews as St. Ignatius—he had a dignity and a kind of bewildered piety which were very impressive. I should also remark the exceptional choreography in the use of the chorus massed in a pyramid, who accented the music at times with sharply outlined movements of the hands—as distinctly a dance movement as the fandango in the later act. The whole rhythm of movement across the stage had a kind of dream quality which went well with Miss Stein's call to our sensibilities, to our not quite conscious minds and perhaps to the memories of our unformed childhood.

I happen to hold a higher opinion of the conscious mind than of the unconscious—the former interests me more and in more ways. I think it quite possible that composers, like painters and even writers, may be forerunners of a kind of mental dissolution when they make too exclusive an appeal to whatever lies below the surface of consciousness. I prefer that part of the method of James Joyce in which he packs ten meanings into a word to the method of Gertrude Stein by which she strips all meanings from words. Yet this opera pleased me more than all but half a dozen in the traditional repertory. It has fantasy and vigor. It can be taken as a gigantic piece of mystification and a huge joke; it certainly should not be taken without laughter. It has taste and liveliness, humor and feeling.

It is perhaps not inappropriate to congratulate Mr. A. Everett Austin, Jr., President of the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music, for his part in bringing "Four Saints" to the world at the Avery Memorial Theatre in Hartford on the seventh of February.