Music and Drama.

By BAYREUTH.

BOOKINGS.
(Dates Subject to Alteration.)

AUCKLAND—HIS MAJESTY'S.

September 29 — "Sweet Nell of Old Drury."
October 3 to 19—Allan Hamilton.
October 20 to November 4—Fred Graham.
November 21 to 26—Auckland Competitions Society.

THE OPERA HOUSE.
In Season—Fuller's Pictures.

TIVOLI.
Vaudeville (permanent).

WELLINGTON.—OPERA HOUSE.
Sept. 24-30.—Johnson-Ketchel Fight Pictures
Oct. 7 to Nov. 5.—Allan Hamilton.
Nov. 12 to Nov. 24.—Macmahon's Pictures.
December 24, six weeks' season.—J. C. Williamson.

THEATRE ROYAL.
Vaudeville (permanent).

A Comedy by the Late Clyde Fitch.

"LOVER'S Lane" is to be the next comedy that New Zealand will witness, and is to be presented by the new Plimmer-Denniston combination, under the management of Allan Hamilton. It is not a melodramatic or a romantic production—at least, it should not be if correctly handled. It is more a comedy of character and atmosphere. The dominating personage of the story, the Rev. Thomas Singleton, vicar of Brentford, is a lovable, generous-natured man, whose parsonage is filled with financially helpless people. It is ruled over by Miss Mattie, a lady whose acidulated loquacity, occasionally sweetened by her devotion to Tom Singleton, is well and brightly shown by Miss Valentine Sidney. Miss Mattie has had to put up with the addition to her household of Simplicity Johnson, a merry "tomboy" of twelve, expelled from an orphanage asylum; Aunt Martha, a silvery-haired coquette, whose dread of "dying in a workhouse," is thus generously relieved; and Uncle Bill, the bell-ringer, who thereby acquires home comforts in his old age. This open-handed hospitality is regarded with jealous dislike by the narrow-minded parishioners. The parson is "stretching them all he can," but his purchase of a billiard-table for the young men's club is denounced on all sides, his investment in playing cards is voted a sacrilege, and their cup is filled to overflowing when it is discovered that pretty Mrs. Herbert Woodbridge, the actress from London, who sings soprano in the choir, is separated from her husband. The lady-organist declines to accompany a "divorced voice," the Sewing Circle boycotts the dangerous visitor, so that she is at her wit's end to find lodging for herself and her little son, and Singleton, with his characteristic defiance of local opinion, promptly finds room for her in his already crowded house. This leads indirectly to the nearest approach to a dramatic situation that the scope of the story admits of. Mary Larkin, a pretty bride of 18 years, arrives at the parsonage, with Herbert Woodbridge, in order to get married. Singleton, much caught by the girl's youthful charm, after asking the usual official question, gives her a ring from his finger to supply the place of the one forgotten by the careless bridegroom, and then calls in members of his household as witnesses. This brings the divorced pair face to face. Mrs. Woodbridge still loves her husband, the young man on his side has told Mary nothing of this complication, and the girl at last consents to follow the vicar's advice, and at least wait six months before uniting herself with a man of whom she evidently knows so little. The rest of the comedy is devoted to showing with ingenuity and tact how Mary, appointed school mistress by the parson whilst waiting the half-year of trial, insensibly responds to his warm admiration, and begins to think less of Herbert Woodbridge. Singleton's position, as a deeply-interested adviser who yet assumes an air of clerical impartiality, is extremely delicate. Eventually a reconciliation is effected between Woodbridge and his deserted wife. The growing attachment between him and Mary sounds the happy ever afterwards note that heralds the curtain. Mr. Reynolds Denniston is to appear as Woodbridge, Mr. Harry Plimmer as the Rev. Singleton, Mrs. Robert Brough as "Mrs. Woodbridge," whilst Miss Lizette Parkes will take the part of "Simplicity Johnson."

The Evolution of Clyde Fitch.

Clyde Fitch was no doubt the most industrious of American playwrights. Never a season passes now where two or three of his plays are not produced with varying success. And yet the critics, when he was alive, especially in New York, dismissed his work, as a rule, with supercilious praise. He was not regarded as literary. And this curious fact must also be recorded: Europe, which regards most American playwrights with amused contempt, lent a willing ear to the late Mr Clyde Fitch. Three or four of the leading theatres in London have produced plays by him, and the sophisticated critical Grand Moguls of Berlin have received "Truth," a drama New York has rejected, with enthusiastic approval. Americans have always regarded Mr Fitch in the light of a clever dramatic causeur, not to be very seriously discussed, but Mr Martin Birnbaum, a friend of the playwright, demonstrated in "The Independent" just before the dramatist's sudden demise last year, a logical development in Mr Fitch's dramatic career. Mr Fitch, it seems, had made and lost several reputations. There was a deepening in his work, though his prodigious facility and his impatience, originating in plentitude of ideas, debarred him for a while from serious recognition.

His Career.

Fitch's real career as a dramatist began in 1890 with "Beau Brummel." He was entirely in sympathy with the subject, being an elegant young dandy himself. He was only twenty-six at the time of the first performance. The play, it will be remembered, achieved a noisy triumph. The author since devoted himself entirely to the drama. His adaptations from the French and the German were not, Mr Birnbaum insists, slavish imitation of foreign works. He endowed the figures with new life, transformed foreign types with genuine American types, and was often entitled to the credit of original creation. This work improved his technique; he became a master of stagecraft and a writer of simple, fluent dialogue. Much of his work was acknowledged to be poor, flimsy hack work; but he might have replied with Dr. Johnson's couplet:

"The drama's laws, the drama's patrons give,
And those live to please must please to live."

If, says Mr Birnbaum, the critic suggests that the favourable opinion of his audiences meant too much money in the playwright's pocket, Fitch, who was above all things a typical American in spirit and a child of his age, smiled blandly and complacently admitted it. In his early original plays, such as "A Modern Match," "The Moth and the Flame," Fitch still clung to established dramatic conventions; but there was the promise of finer work. Before he died he had abandoned the hackneyed phrases, filling his work with technical innovations and keen realistic characterisations. The spontaneity, freedom and liveliness of "The Climbers" effaces the memory of his early transgressions.

"The Climbers."

"The Climbers' opens with a scene which is distinctly Fitch's. To start a play with a party of women returning from a funeral was so daring that it was with difficulty that a manager could be found willing to put it on the boards. Since its very successful production, however, in 1901, his audiences invariably expect some example of this bold pictorial originality. He rarely disappoints them, for his power of invention seems unlimited. At times he allows himself to be too amusing. He hesitates at nothing and occasionally goes beyond the verge of daring. His first nights have an air of gaiety, of delightful expectation. We never know what may or may not happen on those festive evenings. In 'The Way of the World' (a title which had been used by Congreve for one of his masterpieces) we were guests at a baby's sensational christening; in 'The Stubbornness of Geraldine' we were on the wave-tossed deck of an ocean liner; in 'The Girl with the Green Eyes' we were shown the Apollo Belvedere, surrounded by a group of peppermint-eating Cook's tourists; in 'The Girl and the Judge' there was the famous folding-bed scene; 'The Cowboy and the Lady' had the mirth-provoking cure for cursing; 'Her Great Match,' the convenient lovers' corner, moonlit at will, and so on through the long list of plays."

Unrecognised by America Whilst Alive.

Fitch's stage vibrates with life; everything moves with dash, and we are blinded to the fact that many scenes are inessential to the development of the action. As Fitch agrees with Lawrence Sterne's remark that digression is the soul and the sunshine of literature, he deliberately impedes the action for the sake of introducing his brilliantly polished and epigrammatic sayings. In his later work, Fitch succeeded in avoiding the error of distracting his audience. "Her Great Match," "The Woman in the Case," and "The Truth" represent a notable advance. He learned that straightforwardness is not incompatible with theatrical situations. The metropolitan critics, however, with few notable exceptions, treated him with scant respect, and were either purposely or hopelessly undiscerning. They dismissed him as a merely clever man tainted with commercialism, as a writer of ungrammatical English deformed with slang, and a creator of vulgar characters; or they employed that barren kind of criticism which finds fault with dramatist for not writing like some other man. The language of the theatre need not always be correct. Indeed an error of speech, a slang phrase or a colloquialism often breathes the breath of life into a character. The charge of vulgarity is for the most part also the charge of stereotyped criticism. To arraign Fitch because some of his characters are not refined types but ordinary people is as unjust and absurd as it would be to impute to Dryden the obscenity of his. 'I feel very strongly,' said Fitch, in a lecture on the 'Drama,' delivered at Yale, 'the particular value—a value which, rightly or wrongly, I can't help feeling inestimable—of reflecting absolutely and truthfully the life and environment about us; every class, every kind, every emotion, every motive, every occupation, every business, every idleness."

The Last Phase.

Fitch does not condone the weaknesses of his characters, but he is a genial satirist, and his irony free from bitterness, is often mistaken for sympathy. Also the patience of selection often deserts him. He could not restrain his impetuosity. He knew there was room for improvement, but new works had an irresistible fascination for him; and instead of perfecting the old play, he determined to improve upon it in the next. That was the secret of his slow evolution. In his last phase of dramatic authorship, Fitch freed himself in a measure from the tyranny of "stars"—at least, the "star" no longer dominated the entire situation. His studies in femininity were unsurpassed, and his late European successes justified the belief that he would one day write something really fine, at least a great social satire. Unhappily America's most brilliant dramatist was cut off as a comparatively young man. He was just forty-five when death stepped in a few moons ago. Shortly before he died the dramatist declared that "The City" was the finest play he had ever written. Apparently Fitch has profited in his latter years by the study of Ibsen. "Ibsen is right," he confessed to a biographer; "I accept him thoroughly as the master genius of the age. Perhaps we are not ready for him as playgoers, but we shall mount closer and closer to his perfection by reason of the example he has piled high before the intelligence of the younger men who are aware of his message." "The City" was not the last work of Clyde Fitch. There are still two unproduced plays of recent date—"Kitty and the Canary," his last completed work, written for Zeda Sears; and "The Social Guide." "The City," however, is regarded as his valedictory as a playwright. There are touches of humour in the first act, touches of sentiment in the last, which show Clyde Fitch at his very best, and which will compare favourably with the work of any English playwright. The play, said a critic at the time of its production in New York, "is as strong as a raging bull,