

MODERN OPERA

(By Maxwell Fernie.)

NEW ZEALANDERS generally are now receiving opportunities of attending Grand Opera performances for the first time. A knowledge of the origin of Opera has an important relation to the measure of one's enjoyment. While many have derived considerable pleasure from the performances, there are on the other hand a few who have been disappointed mainly on this account.

Probably those in the latter class, who expected more than they saw, were interested listeners when at home to broadcast recordings of Grand Opera. It may be assumed, therefore, that subconsciously they had already formed an idea of a story presentation not unlike that of a cinema production.

NEVER LENGTHY.

In this, of course, disillusionment followed their attendance at a full stage performance of the Operas, where the plot is never lengthy—though often somewhat involved—and where cinema repartee and grandiose scenery are not always possible. Thus, in order to enjoy stage presented opera it is essential to have some knowledge concerning the growth of this type of entertainment which is nationally popular in Italy.

Owing to lack of sufficient reference the writer's memory, particularly with regard to dates, will naturally be the main source of information. However, it is surprising to observe that few people know that Opera was being performed as early as in the 17th century.

OLD OPERA.

Many famous arias sung to-day as concert solos are from old Operas, notably those of Handel (1685-1759), Purcell (1658-1695), Gluck (1714-1787). These arias are in some cases most difficult and obviously vocal art had reached an advanced stage even in those days.

Musical history states that probably about the period from

the 14th century to the 16th century—the Renaissance—there were strolling groups of minstrels all over Europe.

SOMETHING NEW.

These strangers who entertained with songs and dances accompanied by lute or viol were from Italy, often Venetians, who combined good voices with first rate stagecraft. The ability to entertain is traditionally associated with rather temperamental or impetuous natures.

These entertainers later reached even England, and throughout the whole of Western Europe their influence was noticeable. It is assumed that these entertainments were nothing more than an «all-round» concert comprising solos with perhaps a little «play-act-acting» in harmony with some outstanding local event. Probably these solos were what we now know as «topical ditties». In any case this was something new.

Until then, music was fostered by the Church, on account of its importance to the liturgy. Many great composers existed well before this period, but their writings were purely liturgical.

COMPOSITE WHOLE.

As a natural development—this is verified by history—entertainments gradually assumed, through the enthusiasm of the players, more of the nature of a composite whole.

Probably the various solos formed an integral part of the small operettas and again, gradually, small plots were made upon which to «hang», as it were, the phases of the performance. Stage effects were not