

Ex: "Irish Stars of the Opera" by Gus Smith



Chapter One

lovers remains a great disappointment. In operatic terms, too, it has caused musical stagnation and unless the trend is reversed large-scale Verdi works will have to be sacrificed for 'repeats' of *Bohème*, *Butterfly*, *Carmen* and *Traviata*. Nonetheless, there are a few more hopeful signs on the operatic horizon. The 1993 Winter Season was a financial and artistic success, with a number of people failing to get tickets for the popular production of *Bohème*. The success of Delibes' *Lakmé* also augured well for the future, and suggested that the French repertoire could be exploited.

However, as the year 2000 approaches, it would appear that Irish artists will, for the most part, have to continue to look for opportunities overseas and live outside their own country, but at least they are qualified to hold their own with their foreign colleagues. In the chapters ahead, you will read how a number of them have succeeded in Britain and the Continent. In another respect, if this book inspires a new generation of Irish singers to emulate the achievements of the past as well as the present generations, it will have achieved one of its main purposes.

Joseph O'Mara

THE 'IRISH CARUSO'

'My early life was wild, harum-scarum. A devil-may-care was I, and I fear the passing years have not materially changed me but, after all, I come from Limerick.'

Years ago, famous tenor, Joseph O'Mara, made this frank admission when asked by T.P. O'Connor, his London-Irish parliamentary friend, to contribute to his paper. And in the same vein, O'Mara added, 'I was convinced that a life on the ocean wave was the only life for me, so I shipped as an apprentice on board a liner sailing from Dundee to Calcutta. I saw myself as captain of a Cunarder in a year or two. I will not dwell on all I endured on that voyage, suffice to say I returned home totally cured.'

James O'Mara, his father, was the owner of a prosperous bacon factory in Limerick and had hoped that his son would join it, but early on he became only too aware of Joseph's restless disposition.

The O'Mara home was a happy one. 'I was born with a great love of music', the boy would say later on in life. 'I remember my mother's voice which though untrained, was full of purity and sweetness. Hearing her sing folk songs was a delightful treat that never failed to lure me away from the nefarious pursuits upon which I was usually engaged.'

He was born on 16 July 1864, the second youngest of a family of 13 and became a pupil of the local Jesuit College. Despite his wild escapades, he found time to sing in a church choir and was encouraged by his teach-



ers who recognised the potential in his voice.

Joseph was only 14 when his mother died. It was a cruel blow and he took time to get over the trauma. After his short-lived sea voyage, he accepted his father's offer to join the family bacon factory and also resumed singing with St. Michael's Choir. However, he saw a notice of a forthcoming examination for a scholarship at the Royal College of Music, London, and without telling his father he crossed over to England and presented himself for examination.

He was the first of the 30 candidates to sing and was afterwards asked by Sir George Groves whether in the event of his getting the scholarship his father would be able to support him during his career at the college. O'Mara's angry response amused the examiners. 'My father', he retorted, 'could support every student in the college.' They had been impressed enough by his singing to ask again, 'You are quite sure Mr. O'Mara that your father will pay everything necessary?' Unguardedly, young O'Mara replied, 'Oh! I have no doubt he will if I ask him.' He then had to admit that he had come over without his father's knowledge.

He afterwards said, 'I do not know that I would have won the scholarship, but certainly the doubt about my father's willingness to support me destroyed any chance I had.'

However, he had done well enough to justify him in thinking that he might succeed as a singer. He told his father all that had happened and asked permission to follow his true vocation. James O'Mara was sympathetic and saw the futility of keeping his son in the bacon business, but at the same time he pointed out to him the precarious life before him. He feared also that he was not robust enough for such an arduous career.

At this time, Joseph fell in for a small legacy, so feeling very independent - and with his father's blessing - set off for Milan on New Year's Day, 1889. He soon found an able voice coach in Signor Moretti who came to admire his natural tenor voice. Joseph's life fell into a fixed pattern and he grew to like the volatile and warm-hearted Italians. He kept in close touch with home.

'My days are full', he wrote his father. 'I get up early every morning,

breakfast at eight o'clock, then go for a walk. Afterwards, I have books in Italian to study and before noon I have voice lessons with Signor Moretti. I have another walk, then luncheon followed by more lessons. Dinner is at six. Four evenings of the week, I take myself to opera at La Scala.'

In March 1890 he experienced his first crisis. He wrote home: 'Last week I was within a pip of throwing in the sponge and going home. I went to my lesson one day and didn't have the vestige of a singing voice. There and then I told Signor Moretti I'd give up singing and shake the dust of Milan off my shoes. I was in the deepest blues. Moretti argued, scolded and cajoled until I was persuaded to remain a week and test, which I did. Thank goodness my voice is restored and I'm ready for work to-morrow.'

After two years in Milan, O'Mara returned to Limerick more determined than ever to get on with his career. Hearing of a new opera being put on by the D'Oyly Carte in London, he applied for an audition. This was arranged and took place before Richard Carte, founder of the company. When O'Mara asked him for his verdict, Carte said, 'Promising ... very promising indeed. I would like you to come back to-morrow and sing for Sir Arthur.'

'Sir Arthur whom ...?'

'Sir Arthur Sullivan, of course.'

Despite his faux pas, O'Mara was successful. He was engaged to share the title role in Gilbert & Sullivan's new opera, *Ivanhoe* with Ben Davies - then Britain's finest tenor. It was the breakthrough he needed and soon his voice attracted wide notice and he received many concert engagements. He decided, however, to return to Milan to complete his training in Italian opera and took lessons from Signor Perini.

In 1893 while on holiday in Limerick he received a telegram from Sir Augustus Harris asking him to contact him at once. O'Mara lost no time and was told he was wanted for productions of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Pagliacci* and *Faust*, apparently having to go on without rehearsals. On tour with the company he also sang in *Carmen*, *Lohengrin* and *Meistersinger*. In October 1893 the company crossed the Channel to present a season at

Dublin's Gaiety Theatre. O'Mara was delighted with the opportunity to sing opera before his own people, and although the baritone in the performance of *Carmen* was hissed, the critic of the *Freeman's Journal* praised the tenor's singing of the Flower Song and his dramatic acting in the final scene.

As a company member, O'Mara was popular with his colleagues who enjoyed his puckish sense of humour and warm, if forceful character. He clashed with Sir Augustus Harris when he refused to take the leading role in Irish composer Sir Charles Stanford's new opera, *Shamus O'Brien* because he considered it an almost entirely acting part. Sir Augustus was highly indignant and spoke of 'young puppies who did not know on which side their bread was buttered.' Rather than be thought ungrateful, the tenor agreed to play the role if Stanford would write in a special song for him. This was how "Oh! O'hone when I used to be young" came to be written.

In that same year 1896 he married a Miss Power from Waterford, of whom little is known. O'Mara was 32 and, as a singer, enjoyed growing popularity. A year later they set sail together for America where O'Mara was engaged to sing the tenor lead in *The Highwayman*. From all accounts his fine voice and acting ability so impressed impresarios that he was offered attractive concert and operatic work but turned the offers down; he longed to be nearer Ireland.

Back in Britain he was not short of engagements. It was the age of oratorios, concerts and musical 'at homes' and he soon sang in houses of note. One of these musical evenings was given by the Duchess of Manchester, at which O'Mara was introduced to Prince Edward, to be crowned Edward VII shortly afterwards. The artists at the evening's concert included Melba, Paderewski, Kubelik and O'Mara. And around this time, he was associated with the outstanding singers and instrumentalists of the day - Patti, Jean and Edouard de Reszke, Caruso, Tosti, John Coates, Clara Butt, Hamilton Harty, Sir Henry Wood and Coleridge Taylor.

But opera was really the tenor's first love and in 1902 he joined the Moody-Manners Company, one of the most respected in Britain and

toured with them for some years. From Germany came Herr Richard Eckhold, the Wagner conductor who brought with him Toni Seiter as leading mezzo, and the Dutch tenor Philip Brozel who was outstanding. O'Mara appeared with the company in the autumn season at Covent Garden, September 1902, during which he sang Firmiano in one new work, Pizzi's *Rosalba* with Fanny Moody and Francis MacLennan, and Manrico in *Il Trovatore* and *Faust*. The following year he sang there again in *Maritana*, *Romeo et Juliette* and in a new native opera, *The Cross and the Crescent*. In Dublin in 1903 he was the tenor lead in *The Tinker and the Fairy* by Esposito, at the time professor of piano at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. Always a firm favourite with Irish audiences, he went on to achieve a number of operatic 'firsts' in Ireland. He was the first tenor to sing Enzo in *La Gioconda* and in 1908 the first Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. Later he was the first to sing Cavaradossi in Ireland and in the same season was in the Irish premiere of *Samson et Dalila*.

Ever on the move, O'Mara, accompanied by his wife, returned to New York to take the tenor lead in a musical *Peggy Machree* and received such enthusiastic notices in the press that two Dublin papers quoted from them at length.

Under the heading, IRISH TENOR'S TRIUMPH, Ashton Stevens in the *New York Journal* wrote:

'There is an Irish Caruso at the Broadway Theatre and his name is Joseph O'Mara and in a ballad he can sing a sure straight note that hits the heart; he is a real tenor, something of the reedy sweetness of the clarinet, sweetness without cloying his treble voice. He is a virile singer and most of his music in *Peggy Machree* is recruited from the good old virile love songs of Ireland.'

The *Journal of Commerce* commented: 'One of Joseph O'Mara's first lines in *Peggy Machree* is "Ye'll not get such a welcome as that outside of Ireland", but the warmth of the welcome given him last night at the Broadway Theatre by the loyal Irish and others must have made him very doubtful of that statement; in fact in a little curtain speech at the end of the

second act he said "it was worth coming from Ireland for" and was presented with a wreath - a green one - with intertwined Irish and American flags."

But even O'Mara must have been amused by the review of the musical in *The World*, which described him as 'the only Irish comedian of the present day, alleged or real, whose songs have the flavour of the shamrock and convey to his hearers the aspirations, hopes, joys and sorrows of the land from which he spring.'

The *New York Herald*, whose critiques were generally highly valued, remarked, 'If there is any Irish man or woman in New York who was born in Ireland or whose ancestors were Irish, or who ever was in Ireland, that man or woman ought to go to the Broadway Theatre, to see and listen to Mr. O'Mara's presentation of Patrick Bidwell's new romantic musical comedy. When the clever Irish actor-singer was forced by an enthusiastic audience to make a speech he said that he and his company had tried to present a play that was good, clean and wholesome. He might truthfully have added that they had been entirely successful.'

Apart from the nostalgia the musical evoked among the Irish in particular, there was no mistaking the splendid impression O'Mara had made. 'A voice full of feeling', wrote one music critic, and a colleague added, 'A voice rare in its appeal.' There is no doubt that if the tenor had cared to stay in America for a year or more, he would have become a wealthy man. He agreed to sing in the musical at the Park Theatre in Boston and during his stay in the city he and his wife were special guests of the Gerald Griffin Club which was composed of Limerick men and women.

On his return to London, he joined the Thomas Beecham Company in 1909 and a few months later was back on the Covent Garden stage singing in *The Tales of Hoffmann* - a role he shared with Walter Hyde - and *Faust*. In that same year Beecham revived *Shamus O'Brien* at His Majesty's Theatre and the *Irish Times* London correspondent commented: 'Mr. Joseph O'Mara returns to play the part of Mike, the informer, and his fine voice was heard to the greatest effect. In the "Begging Song" he scored a notable success and was several times recalled at the end of the act and a

wreath of laurels was presented to him.'

As a concert artist, he was also in demand. The same paper reported on a 1909 London concert appearance: "Mr. Joseph O'Mara, who received a hearty reception contributed a group of Irish songs, "The Birds Fly South", "My Lagan Love" and "The Heather Glen". As a song interpreter his well-known gifts are highly appreciated, the tenderness which he infused into the strains of "The Birds Fly South" sinking to the faintest pianissimo sounds was a revelation to the audience, and the singular brightness of his vocalism in "The Heather Glen" evoked applause from every part. After the interval he sang "Celeste Aida" with highly dramatic effect and was obliged to add an encore, "I'll sing thee songs of Araby."

For touring purposes he formed his own concert party. Monday, 20 February 1911 found him at the Town Hall, Ballina, Co. Mayo. His party included Angelo Fronani, the celebrated pianist. He was loudly applauded when he sang "On the Road to Castlebar" and as an encore "Believe Me". On the operatic side the tenor gave an intensely dramatic rendering of "On with the Motley". In the same week he and his party, which included the Covent Garden soprano Edith Evans and New Zealand contralto Irene Ainsly were accorded a rousing reception at the Theatre Royal in Limerick.

The year 1912 was to be a highlight in Joseph O'Mara's career. Limerick people rejoiced when he was accorded the Freedom of the City, an honour they felt he richly deserved, for in their eyes he was their ambassador of song. Bands played at the railway station to greet his arrival and he and his wife were conveyed in an open, horse-drawn carriage through the city streets. The tenor counted the experience as one of the proudest moments of his life.

In the same year he formed the Joseph O'Mara Opera Company and recruited a number of Irish singers, including Henry O'Dempsey, tenor, and his soprano wife, Kathleen McCully, mezzo Florence Cahill and baritone John Browne. They were cast with O'Mara in *The Lily of Killarney*, where in the kitchen scene the tenor always interpolated an Irish ballad,

more often than not "Oft in the Stilly Night" or "The Derry Air".

For his first Dublin season, October 1913 he opened singing Raoul in *The Huguenots*. The company missed Dublin in 1914 because of the outbreak of war. In February 1915, however, he returned for two weeks with the special attraction of Zélie de Lussan as guest artist in her renowned role of Carmen, which she sang four times, supported by O'Mara, Lewys James and Florence Morden. De Lussan had been singing the part since the 1880s and was now on her final tour.

By 1919 the O'Mara Company was so popular in Dublin that it was engaged for four weeks in February and another four in June and this continued for several years, despite the fact that the Carl Rosa Company also gave three weeks opera in the autumn. From this period onwards O'Mara produced many interesting works, notably Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* in which he also sang; *Mignon*, *A Masked Ball*, *La Wally* (Catalani), *Tristan and Isolde*, *Orpheus* (Gluck) and Mozart's *Seraglio*. Another revival was Balfe's *The Rose of Castile* which proved quite a hit. During these years the O'Mara Company appeared with great success at the Opera House, Cork and the Theatre Royal, Limerick. Usually on arrival at the railway station in Limerick he and the company were welcomed by a brass band and the tenor himself sometimes sang an aria from *The Bohemian Girl* or *Maritana* to the waiting crowd.

The year 1924 saw him introduce a complete novelty in *Der Evangelimann* by the Austrian composer Wilhelm Kienzl, which had a splendid singing/acting role for O'Mara, who produced it for a few seasons but as with *La Juive*, a good deal of its success was due to the tenor's masterly characterisation. When the company visited Liverpool the local Rabbi went to see *La Juive* and was so thrilled by O'Mara's acting as the old Jew Eleazar that he presented him with a Jewish garment and jewelled dagger which the tenor afterwards always wore when doing the role.

Considering that opera today is heavily subsidised, the question will inevitably be asked as to how the O'Mara company managed to operate on box-office receipts alone. The fact was that in Dublin, Cork and Limerick the company normally performed to full houses. Was the staging then

substandard?

'There was nothing shoddy about the O'Mara productions', a Dublin lady, Mrs. Harriet Simpson, would recall later. 'They were well dressed, the scenery was perfectly adequate, and taken all round were satisfactory performances of a very big repertoire. For a touring company, O'Mara's was a first-class show all round.'

By now he was acknowledged as an outstanding actor-singer. His Canio was unforgettable. As one critic wrote, 'With his heart-broken sobs, he could tear passion to tatters and at the same time never exaggerate the character.' Like many artists who excelled in tragic parts, the tenor could also extract the last ounce of humour from roles that lent themselves to mirth, such as Myles na-gCopaleen in *The Lily of Killarney* and Mike Murphy in Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien*. Sir Charles Stanford told of one occasion when he was conducting his opera and O'Mara was in exuberant form and so funny were his antics that Sir Charles became quite doubled up with laughter and unable to conduct. He had to lay down his baton, the orchestra ceased playing and also commenced to roar with laughter along with the entire audience; and only when all had recovered and the uproar ceased could the opera proceed.

Yet the critic of the *Irish Times* in February 1918 observed: 'Mr. O'Mara's Lohengrin is to my mind one of his best parts; it is not hurricane passion like Tannhauser, it demands a purer vocalism, a quiet dignity, a calm and spiritual character, and yet, at the back of it all, an abundance of reserve power. This is what we get from Mr. O'Mara; we never lose sight of the fact that his Lohengrin has come from another sphere and that no earthly Prince has power to restrain him, O'Mara sang his music with such dignity.'

The tenor went on to sing the title role in Harold A. White's new-opera, *Shaun the Post* to such effect that White, then a prominent Dublin music critic, stated, 'O'Mara's success as Shaun was electrifying. He gave the character more humour, more romance, more dramatic significance than I ever dreamt could be put into it.'

O'Mara had evidently prepared the role meticulously, and in numbers

such as his "Leprechaun" song in the first act and the meditation in prison, where he sang "The Derry Air", his performance was excellent.

He was by now in his middle fifties and Shaun the Post was the last new role he attempted. But his voice remained in good shape, as was evidenced in a revival of *Shamus O'Brien*, when one Dublin critic wrote, 'Seeing and hearing Mr. O'Mara last night, it was easy to understand the popularity of this opera and the extent of the tenor's reputation when both were at their biggest.'

Such was his secure vocal technique that he experienced no real difficulty in tackling either light or dramatic roles. Occasionally his puckish Limerick humour got the better of him, as when he sang Myles na gCopaleen he liked to pull funny faces at the prima donna whenever possible without the audience seeing him. Once, as one of the lovers in *Romeo et Juliette*, he stood before the Friar to be married and persisted in tickling the poor Friar's bare feet with the long feather in his hat.

On another occasion, he was singing Faust and wasn't feeling very well, so he sent his dresser out for brandy. It was close to closing time and the pubs were shut by the time the dresser got there. Back in the theatre, he waited in the wings until O'Mara caught his eye and he indicated to him 'no brandy.' At that moment as Martha sang, "Oh, distressing news ... grief beyond expression", O'Mara burst into laughter and was obliged to finish the scene with his back to the audience.

Altogether he sang in 67 operas. A prodigious worker, he was blessed with an exceptional musical memory. He could prompt either soprano, contralto, baritone or bass in any one of the operas in which he sang. Because of his innate acting ability it was agreed that if ever he lost his voice he could have earned a good living as an actor. During the peak of his career, he never lost touch with Ireland. He judged singing competitions several times in Dublin and Sligo and to this day the O'Mara Cup is competed for at the Dublin Feis Ceoil.

After he retired the company was taken over by Cynlaide Gibbs (who had been a tenor in it) and run under his name. Still later it reverted to the

O'Mara Opera Company and as such made its last appearance at the old Cork Opera House. Incidentally, it was in Cork years before that O'Mara gave his first operatic recital, singing excerpts from *Travatore*. 'A voice of rare quality', summed up one local critic. 'Mr. O'Mara can look forward to a very bright future.'

When he died in Dublin on 5 August 1927 the newspapers stated, 'Death has removed the greatest figure in the Irish musical world, a great singer and the greatest force behind grand opera in Ireland.'

Unfortunately, he left behind few, if any, worthwhile recordings, certainly none by which to assess the true merit of his operatic singing. Listening to him sing, for instance, "The Heather Glen" gives no clue to a voice that we are told thrilled audiences in roles such as Don Jose and Manrico; no hint either of the tenor who so impressed Covent Garden audiences in *The Cross and the Crescent* in September 1903. One can only assume that O'Mara's voice possessed the range, depth and colour to cope with such contrasting roles as Samson, Canio, Hoffmann and Lohengrin. Looking at old photographs of the tenor, showing a solid frame and broad shoulders, one feels he had the physical stamina for Wagnerian roles.

O'Mara's manager, it appears, was bitterly disappointed with the quality of his recordings. 'They are libels on that lovely voice' he once declared.

In the final analysis, the tenor has to be judged on his stage record and there is no denying its merit. He sang with many of the finest singers of his day and more than held his own. In addition, he was the quintessential Irishman who thought nothing of accepting a concert date in Ennis while at the same time rehearsing a new operatic role for Covent Garden.

In Limerick his name is not entirely forgotten, though he is surely worthy of greater recognition. A small plaque on the facade of the house where he was born, and which today is known as Ozanam House, the headquarters of the local St. Vincent de Paul Society, is the only reminder of one of Limerick's most famous sons.

Would not a bursary in his name, awarded, say, annually to a talented young Limerick singer or instrumentalist, be more lasting and appropriate?