

“Gypsy Love Song”—Eugene Cowles (1898)

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Essay by Alyce Mott (guest post)*



Eugene Cowles

The Amazing Ramifications of A Simple Recording of “Gypsy Love Song” by Eugene Cowles

Bass Eugene Cowles (1860-1948) appears to be one of the first Broadway-level singers to begin recording around 1898 for Berliner Gramophone, a rival of Thomas Alva Edison. Not only was Cowles a Broadway-level singer, he was a member of the Bostonians, a.k.a. the Boston Ideal Opera Company, a national operetta company formed in 1879 with negligible competition prior to 1898. Dedicated to the presentation of “light” opera with excellent voices, good acting, and high production values, the company toured the United States and Canada from coast to coast, playing every important metropolis for 12 years. They were one of the first “national” professional touring companies, playing major cities for weeks at a time. Their productions of Gilbert & Sullivan were the beginning of the operetta movement in America.

The organization was led by William H. MacDonald, Tom Karl and Henry Clay Barnabee. Barnabee became the innovator of the company with his biggest contribution to both the Bostonians and the American musical theatre being his decision to commission American operettas. Barnabee began with Reginald De Koven (particularly, “Robin Hood” in 1891) and then, Victor Herbert. The Herbert commissions included “Prince Ananias” (1894), “The Serenade” (1897) and “The Viceroy” (1900).

Eugene Cowles was the Bostonian resident romantic bass. Prior to 1900, it was common to have two principal basses in an operetta company: the romantic hero type (Cowles) and the comic, patter song character man (Barnabee).

The fascinating tidbit about this song and Mr. Cowles is that, at the time, the actor had left the Bostonians to join the Alice Nielson Opera Company which had commissioned Victor Herbert to write "The Fortune Teller," libretto and lyrics by Harry Bache Smith, for Miss Nielson. Here was the first real threat to the Bostonians.

To make a very long story short, Herbert heard a brand new Bostonian member, Miss Nielson, sing, and wrote a second lead in "The Serenade" just for her. Thus would arise the often typical political spat in theatrical companies between an aging leading lady and a young, talented newcomer. That spat ended with Ms. Nielson resigning from the Bostonians after the run of "The Serenade" and announcing she was forming The Alice Nielson Opera Company. Just for good measure, she commissioned Victor Herbert to write "The Fortune Teller" for her.

In addition, Nielson took a major portion of the Bostonians with her, including romantic lead Eugene Cowles. A gal always needs a great leading man.

Herbert produced a score for "The Fortune Teller" which invoked the deeply exotic land of pre-1900 Hungary. It contains some of the most beloved "gypsy" music ever composed by a non-gypsy: "Romany Life," "Czardas" (the non-singing version of Romany Life), and the "Gypsy Love Song." While you might not be familiar with the titles, you are sure to recognize the tune of "Gypsy Love Song" immediately.

Herbert and Smith created two separate roles for Miss Nielson: Irma, a ballet dancer and Musette, a gypsy fortune teller. Then feeling particularly vigorous, they added a third in the character of Irma's twin brother Fedor. Miss Nielson played all three parts.

Pre-1900, following the European style of operetta, the tenor remained a bit of a light weight character--not the hero exactly, fairly vain and a bit on the silly side. This is particularly true in the delightful duet for Ladislas and the equally silly opera diva Pompon, "Only In The Play." She professes great love for him and he counters with "but that was only in the play."

However, when the creators have their leading lady playing three different roles, something must give, and thus, Ladislas ends up with Irma while Sandor (Cowles) the Gypsy Prince and his Musette conveniently disappear after he passionately sings his "Gypsy Love Song," longing for Musette's return.

This song, "Gypsy Love Song," became a huge hit from "The Fortune Teller" (1898), which served as a body blow to the national operetta company the Bostonians (gone by 1905). It also launched Alice Nielson as the first legitimate Victor Herbert diva as well as the first American female to run her own opera company!

Not quite finished, "The Fortune Teller" served two other major purposes. Not only did our gutsy female producer tour the country with "The Fortune Teller," she also took it to London for a three months run beginning on April 9, 1901 in Shaftesbury Theatre. The London production launched wonderfully but tapered off to a less than successful end. The hot weather in London forced the closing of the theatre by the end of June. A promise to reopen in the fall with "The Fortune Teller" failed to materialize. Interestingly, the Alice Nielsen Opera Company disbanded

in London and Nielson returned to her first love, opera and the concert stage, never venturing back to operetta.

Perhaps the most important result of this production was Victor Herbert finding himself a rising, in-demand composer and newly-minted classical conductor (The Pittsburgh Symphony). From 1886 to 1898, his publisher had been E. Schuberth, the American branch of the European publisher. In 12 short years, Herbert had proven a prolific composer of classical orchestral music, five Broadway operettas, and a financially astute deliverer of commercial sheet music from each operetta. More than 40 Herbert songs graced America's home pianos. American publishers decided it was time to woo the young musical midas. And the winner was. . . .

M. Witmark & Sons, Inc.. founded in 1886 by Marcus for his underage sons, Isidore, Julius and Jay (17-14), the boys would create a publishing house which dominated the theatrical music business well into the 20th century. It was M. Witmark & Sons who would sign Victor Herbert to a life-long contract. Together, Herbert and his new publisher would build a theatrical licensing behemoth, launching an entirely new revenue machine. Today, they remain the Tams Witmark Music Library, Inc.

“Gypsy Love Song” is indeed a richly amazing American theatrical recording!

A worldwide Herbert scholar, stage director and librettist, Alyce Mott is the founder/Artistic Director of the Victor Herbert Renaissance Project LIVE! (VHRP LIVE!), a NYC based theatrical company dedicated solely to the works of Irish American composer Victor Herbert (1859-1924). She is also the owner/publisher of VHSsource, LLC, an on-line digital resource for original performance materials for Victor Herbert.

*The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.