

SIX DECADES OF OBERAMMERGAU

THE writer of these words first witnessed the Passion Play in 1880, and he has done so on each occasion since. The contrast between then and now is indeed a striking one. In 1880 the arrangements were very primitive, there was no railway to the village, and visitors had to drive by carriage fifteen miles from the nearest station if they could afford the expense, or else walk or get a lift in a jolting hay waggon. Whilst the accommodation was much easier to obtain in those days, the lodgings and commissariat were naturally on a very modest scale, foreign visitors were rare, and the necessity for providing modern facilities had not arisen. The theatre itself was very uncomfortable, for the seats were merely narrow planks without backs, and to sit on them for the eight hours of performance was most fatiguing. On the other hand, the prices were very much less. The audience, mostly peasants and their families, brought provisions—beer and sausages—with them and consumed them during the performance. Then, as now, the actors were exposed to the elements, but their costumes, which were formerly supplied from the Royal theatres, are now designed and made in the village workshops. It is indeed remarkable that the whole performance is produced without any aid from outside, and that even the large orchestra is recruited in Oberammergau. In fact, no one who is not native-born can take any part in the play.

The writer attended the grand rehearsal given on May 8th for members of the Bavarian Government, high officials, and the press. Although, as mentioned before, he had seen the play on so many occasions, he found that his interest in it had not waned one whit, and he was hardly wearied at the end of the long day.

Blackfriars

This year there is a new Christus. Anton Lang, who played the part with very great distinction in 1900, 1910, and 1922, has been succeeded most adequately by his kinsman, Alois. Mary, although too young for her part, has an excellent delivery, but Mary Magdalen is the better actress. John, Judas, Peter, Caiaphas and Annas, as well as most of the other players, compare well with the actors of former years. Pontius Pilate, although his diction is good, is rather awkward in his movements, and hardly puts sufficient energy into his part. Remarkable is the fact that the whole caste speaks without trace of Bavarian dialect.

In general the *rôle* of the Oberammergau chorus is not adequately appreciated. It is in fact vital to the drama itself, for it not only interprets the scenes represented on the stage, but it also brings the audience into direct contact with it. It illustrates, illumines and teaches, it warns and appeals, keeping the soul in tune and enabling it to sustain the heart and mind in the long effort which the tremendous drama requires.

The Choragus greets all who have come together in sympathetic words, accepting them at once as friends, who are like-minded with the performers and exhorting them to assist reverently at the Mystery to be set forth. 'All Hail, welcome to the band of brothers, whom love divine hath here assembled, who wish to share the sorrows of the Saviour and to follow him, step by step, on the way of his sufferings to the Cross and the sepulchre.' The key-note to the whole is given in the first solemnly intoned prologue:—

'I desire not,' thus saith the Lord,
'the sinner's death—I will forgive him—
he shall live again,'

and is sustained in the lines sung as the Chorus divide and retire to either side of the stage, while the curtain

Six Decades of Oberammergau

risers and we see the first typical tableau from the Old Testament—Adam and Eve driven from Paradise.

Dedler's music, written in 1750, may be too baroque and lively for some tastes, and the otherwise praiseworthy orchestra sometimes drowns the voices to the detriment of the text, which is the principal thing, and should be paramount. But on the whole the chorus achieves wonders. It prepares us in beautiful words and impressive music for the ensuing scene.

Of poignant beauty is the part song sung during the second tableau, Act VII, the Murder of Amasa by Joab.

CHORUS.

'The scene near Gibeon's rocks—
Judas repeateth—Simon's son—
Ye rocks of Gibeon!
Why stand ye thus unhonoured
Ye, late the land's proud boast
As though with mourning veil enwrapped?
Say, I adjure, thee, say—
What deed was done?'

Then, again, Second Tableau, Act IX, The Affliction of Job:

'Behold the man! A Job in pain.
Ah, whom doth he not move to tears?
His friends and e'en his wife make sport
Before him mocking at his woe.
Behold the man!

'Behold the man! Yet who may call
Him still a man?
From hand to foot his body now
Despoiled of every grace is seen.
Behold the man!

Blackfriars

' O all ye moved and grieved hearts !
As Jesu, Jesu, Son of God,
Becomes the scorn and jest of knaves
Amid His endless strife of pain.
Behold the man ! '

How touching is each aria as sung by Anton Lang.

Act V : The last Supper.

' The hour now draweth near,
Fulfilment now begins
Of all which by his seers
God to mankind made known.

' A new feast I establish
Thus saith the Lord, " and it shall be
throughout the world's great circle
An offering of this Covenant. " '

(First Tableau : Joseph's Brethren bringing his blood-stained coat to Jacob.)

' Where is my Joseph? where my joy,
In whose sweet eyes mine eyes find rest?
The blood is dripping from his coat,
The blood of Joseph, of my son.

' Thus mourns he—thus does he lament
For Joseph—that he is no more.
Thus Jesu's body will be torn
With wildest rage
His precious blood
In streams from every wound will flow.'

Six Decades of Oberammergau

Here ensues the very dramatic scene of The Sanhedrim :

‘ O God destroy this evil band
Who against Thee now rebel,
That they feel Thine anger’s strength :
Strike them downward into dust !’

This is followed by a glorious soprano solo :

‘ No ! never came He to destroy.
From the Father’s Majesty
Sinners shall through Him inherit
Pardon, Grace and endless bliss.’

Extremely beautiful is (in the Second Tableau, Act III, ‘ The Lamenting Bride of the Canticles attended by Eight Daughters of Jerusalem) the song :

‘ Whither is he gone, O whither ?’

and the touching reiterated answer :

‘ Beloved companion comfort take !
Thy friend again will come to thee.’

The Chorus to the Second Tableau, Act V, is likewise very effective (‘ The Grapes brought by the Spies from Canaan ’) preceding the Last Supper :

‘ Good is the Lord, the Lord is good,
Once hath He to His people
The best juice of the vine
Given from Canaan’s land.

‘ The Lord is good, the Lord is good,
In the new covenant He gives
His flesh and blood at that High Feast
In Salim’s upper room.’

Blackfriars

Then, again, Act XV, The Way of the Cross :

‘ Pray and render heartfelt thanks,
He, who drank the cup of pain,
To the cross of death now goes
Reconciling man with God.’

During the tableau of the goat slain as a sin offering (Act XIII) the chorus sings of the new sacrifice required for the pardon of sin :—

‘ A Lamb from every blemish pure : ’

and then suddenly the song is interrupted, and for the first time the chorus actually takes part in the drama; the Chorus exclaiming, when fierce shouts are heard in the distance :

‘ The murder’s fearful cry I hear . . . ’

and whilst the unseen mob thunders forth :

‘ Barabbas be our choice to-day,’

the Chorus answers :

‘ No, Jesus be from fetters free.’

Again and again the scenes portrayed and the words accompanying seem calculated to remind the audience of man’s complicity in the sufferings of the Redeemer. In the tableau—Joseph sold by his brethren to the Ishmaelites (Act IV, The Betrayal), how simple yet telling are the words sung by the chorus :

‘ How often have ye by your deeds
Your God e’en thus betrayed and sold?
On Joseph’s brethren ye pour
Curses, and on th’ Iscariot,
And yet in the same paths ye tread;
For envy, greed, and brother’s hate,
‘ Unceasingly exterminate
‘ Man’s peace, and joy, and blessedness.’

Six Decades of Oberammergau

The Passion Play will be witnessed this summer by immense audiences. The theatre seats five thousand persons, and it is difficult to believe that a majority of them will fail to retain a vivid impression of the deep spiritual significance of the spectacle.

W. S. MANNING.