In my last article I wrote about the Grand Opera House which stood in San Antonio, opened by the American singer Emma Abbott with her opera company which for some years toured the United States and Canada (Newsletter 75). I thought the lady in question sounded fascinating and although I only had a little information about her it would have made the piece about the Grand too long for that Newsletter and so I proposed to write about her in a later one. After further research here it is.

@@@

Milanese by apologizing for her; she then appeared before the curtain kissing her hands to the audience and sang some Italian songs before continuing with the opera.

Emma then moved to London where she was engaged by Frederick Gye for his season at Covent Garden. Harold Rosenthal in his book Two Centuries of Opera at Covent Garden wrote, "the singers in the new season were completely unimportant with the exception of the American soprano Emma Abbott". Her debut on the 2nd May 1876 was as Marie in Donizetti's *"La Fille du régiment"* but this seems to have been her one and only appearance at Covent Garden. By this time she would appear to have had her own strong ideas about her performances which sometimes upset others.

The following year she signed a contract with Colonel Mapleson, who wanted her to sing Violetta in *"La Traviata"*. She refused, her reason being that "Violetta was a wicked wanton who loved sin". Mapleson, angry, told her, "if you are so good, so very good, you should have taken the veil, and be a Mother Superior in some nunnery instead of trying to acquire a position on the opera stage"

By now the idea that performances should be as the composer intended and not subject to the singers' whim was beginning to take effect. Emma did not care for Europe and it appears that the sentiment was reciprocated. She now decided to return to America and present opera to the people there in the ways she thought they would appreciate. Other opera companies were touring the mid west but mainly to the larger towns and cities. With that in mind Emma left Europe for home in 1878. (see note 1)

Her debut in the U.S.A. was at the Academy of Music, New York on the 23rd Feb 1877, again as Marie in *"La Fille"*. (see note 1) In 1879 she formed the Emma Abbott English Grand Opera Company with her husband who became her business manager. (see note 2), but she really ran the company herself. Touring must have been a hard life. Performances were given six and even seven times a week; Emma maintained that singers could sing that often without any damage to the voice. She enforced strict moral principles and the company was run in a very businesslike manner. The repertoire was mainly popular, *Faust, Martha, La Sonnambula, Roméo et Juliette, The Bohemian Girl, The Mikado, Erminie and The Chimes of Normandy* (see note 3). I have found reference to four by Donizetti, *Lucia di Lammermoor, La Fille du régiment, Anna Bolena and Lucrezia Borgia,* the last being the one with which she inaugurated the Grand in San Antonio. This was not the only opera house which saw Emma Abbott for its first performances. During the ten or so years that her company toured they must have given the opening performances in at least twenty four. In fact while the Grand was still in the planning stage she was asked to open the theatre to which she replied, "I'll be there if I have to come 3,000 miles to do so."

When the telegram arrived giving the opening date Emma and her company were in Omaha, Nebraska, a considerable distance away. A special train was hired to take them across the great western plains and although delayed by three train wrecks, the last of which happened only the day before the opening night, Emma kept her promise.

Emma still continued to insert hymns and ballads into her performances despite the critics' objections.

She would receive requests to sing 'The Last Rose of Summer' and would do so regardless of which opera was being performed. As for her costumes, she spent thousands of dollars on them, most of them designed by Worth, but they had little or nothing to do with the character she was portraying (see illustration). In *Crispino e la Comare* by Luigi and Federico Ricci when the Comare strips off her disguise of rags Emma was revealed in a gown of black velvet and rose crepe-de-chine, glittering with jewels at her throat, wrists and in her hair. She felt that the women in the audience led a hard, and perhaps humdrum life and if she could bring some glamour to them she would and she did.

Clara Louise Kellogg in her memoirs wrote "I have always felt about Emma Abbott that she had too much force of character". Perhaps she did but it stood her in good stead. Once in Nashville, Tennessee, a pastor knowing that some of his parishioners had been to the opera rebuked them from his pulpit. "Opera is sinful and actors in league with hell". Emma was in the congregation that day; she stood up and replied, "the theatre is a profession which can be followed with hearts as pure, and lives as irreproachable as may be your own". The congregation applauded her.

In December 1890 in Salt Lake City, exhausted from too much work and the ardours of travel, she became ill but insisted on going on stage. The theatre was sold out and she did not want to disappoint her public, (or as it has been unkindly said, refund any money due to the performance being cancelled). After she had returned to her hotel she collapsed with a raging fever, a doctor was called, but Emma sensed the end was near and whispered,
"Doctor, I am booked".
"Booked, for where, Miss Abbott?".
"Paradise, Doctor, for Paradise".
Emma lapsed into a coma and died on the 5th January 1891.

It was estimated that she left a fortune in excess of one million dollars.

Note 1...Two reference books I have consulted give 1878 as the date when Emma Abbott left Europe, but also gave 1877 as the date when she made her American debut.

Note 2...Again I have come up against a discrepancy in the reference books. One states that her husband who helped to form the company was a Charles H. Pratt, while the other says that the gentleman in question was a Eugene Wetherell.

Note 3...I cannot trace details of the last two operas quoted in the company's repertoire. Maybe *Erminie* is a misprint for Rossini's *Ermione.* But does anyone recogise *The Chimes of Normandy* ?. As all performances were sung in an English translation is it perhaps *Les Cloches de Corneville* by Planquette.

Perhaps one of our American members can answer these mysteries.

Pip Clayton