

Martha

[Opéra comique, in three acts; text by St. Georges. First produced in Vienna, November 25, 1847.]

PERSONAGES.

Plunkett, a wealthy young farmer. Lionel, his adopted brother, afterwards Earl of Derby. Lord Tristan Mickleford, Lady Henrietta's cousin. Sheriff of Richmond, footman to Lady Henrietta. Lady Henrietta, Maid of Honor to the Queen. Nancy, her waiting-maid. Molly Pitt, } Polly Smith, } Betsy Witt, } servants.

[Farmers, farmers' wives, servants, ladies, hunters, huntresses, and footmen.]

The scene is laid in Richmond, England; time of Queen Anne.

The first act of "Martha," unquestionably the most popular of all light operas, opens during the progress of the servants' fair at Richmond, whither Lady Henrietta, maid of honor to the Queen, accompanied by Nancy, her maid, and Sir Tristan, her aged cousin and admirer, tired of court life, have resorted in the disguise of servants. In the first three scenes they arrange their masquerade. Sir Tristan, much to his disgust, is to be known as John, and Lady Henrietta as Martha. The first number is a duet for the two ladies, "Of the Knights so Brave and Charming," followed by an animated trio with Sir Tristan, in dance time. The fourth scene is laid in the market-place, in which appear Plunkett, a wealthy farmer, and Lionel, his adopted brother. The parentage of the latter is unknown, but he has a souvenir from his father in the form of a ring which he is to present to the Queen whenever he shall find himself in trouble. Lionel tells his story in a tenor aria, "Lost, proscribed, a Humble Stranger," which has been a favorite song the world over for years. The two have come to the fair to engage servants for the year, who are bound over by the sheriff.

Plunkett and Lionel meet Martha and Nancy, and are so delighted with their looks that they tender the customary bonus which secures them. They accept it as a joke, but find that it is a serious matter when the young farmers drive off with them, leaving Sir Tristan in despair.

The second act opens in Plunkett's farmhouse. After having learned their names, Plunkett attempts to find out what they can do, and tests them first at the spinning-wheel, which leads up to the delightful spinning quartette, "When the Foot the Wheel turns lightly." It does not take the brothers long to find out that they have engaged servants who are more ornamental than useful, but they decide to keep them. Nancy in a pet kicks her wheel over and runs off, followed by Plunkett, leaving Lionel alone with Martha. He at once falls in love with her, snatches a rose from her bosom, and refuses to return it unless she will sing. She replies with the familiar song, "The Last Rose of Summer," interpolated by Flotow, and made still more effective by introducing the tenor in the refrain. He asks for her hand, but she makes sport of him. In the mean time Plunkett and Nancy return, and a beautiful Good-night quartette follows, "Midnight Sounds." The brothers then retire, and Martha and Nancy, aided by Sir Tristan, make their escape. The next scene opens in the woods where farmers are carousing; among them Plunkett, who sings a rollicking drinking-song, "I want to ask you." The revel is interrupted by a hunting-party of court ladies, headed by the Queen. Martha and Nancy are among them, and are recognized by Plunkett and Lionel, but they are not recognized in turn. Plunkett attempts to seize Nancy, but the huntresses drive him off, leaving Lionel and Lady Henrietta alone. The scene is one of the most effective in the opera, and contains a beautiful tenor solo, "Like a Dream Bright and Fair"--better known perhaps by its Italian title, "M'appari," and a romance for soprano, "Here in Deepest Forest Shadows," the act closing with a finely concerted quintette and chorus. The despairing Lionel bethinks him of his ring, gives it to Plunkett, and asks him to show it to the Queen. It proves that he is the only son of the late Earl of Derby, and his estate, of which he has been unjustly deprived, is restored to him.

The opera reaches its musical climax in the second act. The third is mainly devoted to the dénouement. The Lady Henrietta, who has really been seriously in love with Lionel, is united to him, and it hardly needs to be added that Nancy and Plunkett go and do likewise.