

JOSEPH O'MARA OPERATIC TENOR

BY ANTHONY RIORDAN

Ask anyone today who is Ireland's greatest living tenor and you will probably receive a variety of answers, or possibly no reply whatever. Travel back in time to the forties and thirties of this present century, and the unhesitating answer would have been the great John McCormack. Travel back still further to almost a century ago and right up to the early twenties of this century and the reply would undoubtedly have been Joseph O'Mara. Yet O'Mara is almost forgotten today, probably because the system of recording was so primitive in this period that none of the few records which he made does do him justice and, as a result, he is seldom heard today.

This is a great pity, because he was outstanding as an operatic tenor, as well as being a magnificent actor. He was also – on the evidence of my father who knew him personally – a kindly and generous character. He was in every sense of the word, a true gentleman, who loved his native city – his 'dear old Limerick', as he liked to call it. He was born in Limerick in 1866, one of the youngest of the large family of James O'Mara, the founding father of the bacon-curing firm of O'Mara Ltd. The O'Mara family can claim to have been one of the most distinguished of their time in Limerick and Munster.

Stephen O'Mara, the eldest brother of Joseph, as well as being successful in business and administration, became Mayor of Limerick, an Irish Nationalist Party M.P. in the British Parliament and, finally, a senator of the Irish Free State. Other members of the family were prominent in the Catholic Church, in politics, in the legal and medical professions, as well as in business life.

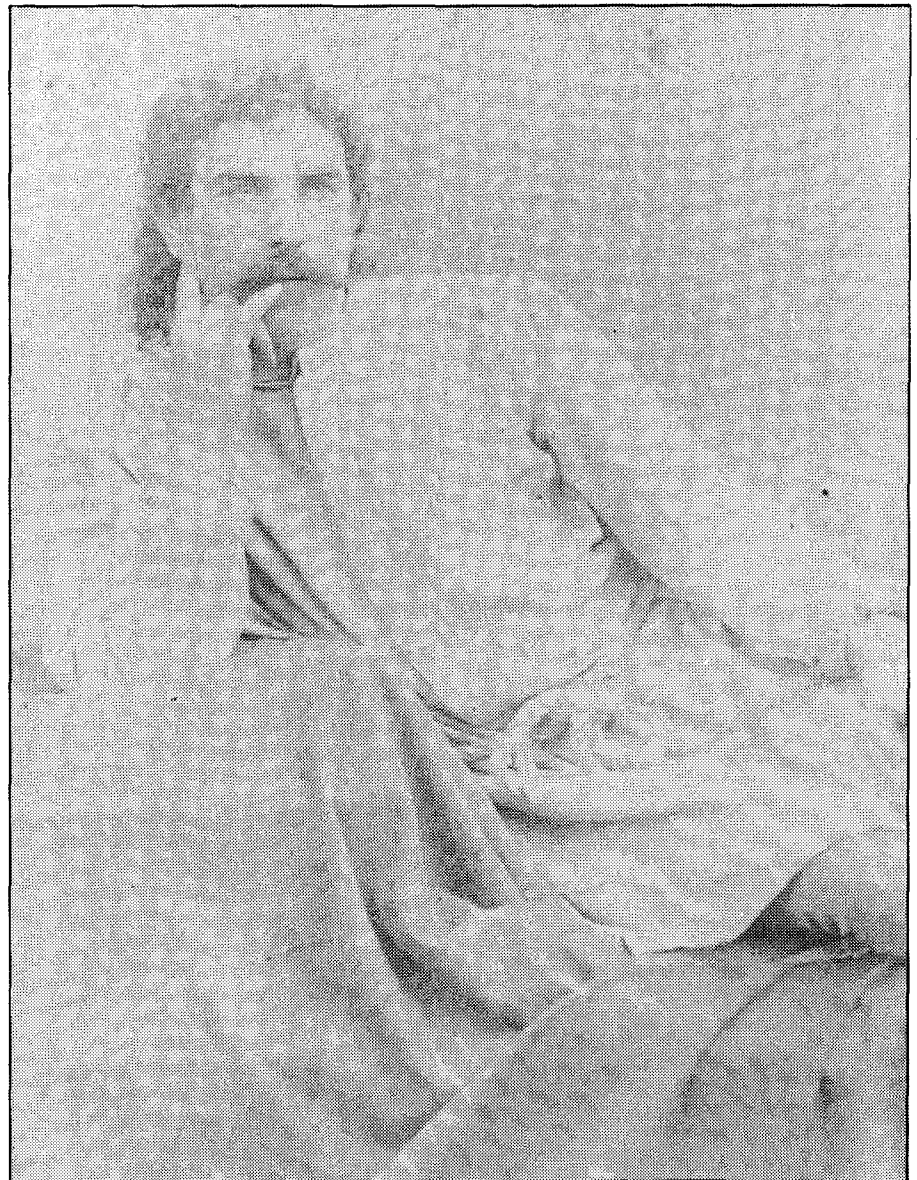
In recent years, no less than two memorial tributes to Joseph O'Mara, one by the Limerick Choral and Operatic Society and the other by Limerick Civic Trust, have been affixed to Ozanam House – originally known as Hartstonge House – but it would appear that he had been born before the family took up residence there. However, he loved his home in Hartstonge House and, in later years, on his return from trips abroad, he would sing from the balcony for his admirers crowded below on the street.

This balcony can still be seen on the front of the building. It may be of interest to recall that Hartstonge House had been previously the residence of the Harris family who were also prominent in the business life of Limerick and who are now world famous through the acting ability of Richard Harris.

Having completed his education at Crescent College, nothing would satisfy young Joe O'Mara but to go to sea, an experiment which did not last very long, but, as he said himself on one occasion,

he discovered while at sea that he had 'some kind of a voice', and so, after some time as an amateur, he decided to make singing his profession. Like John McCormack, some years later, off he went to study in Milan, under one of the leading teachers of the time, Signor Moretti, with whom he worked for about two years.

About that time, the composer, Sir Arthur Sullivan, having broken off his association with W.S. Gilbert, decided to try his hand at grand opera, and so, in



Joseph O'Mara as Ivanhoe.

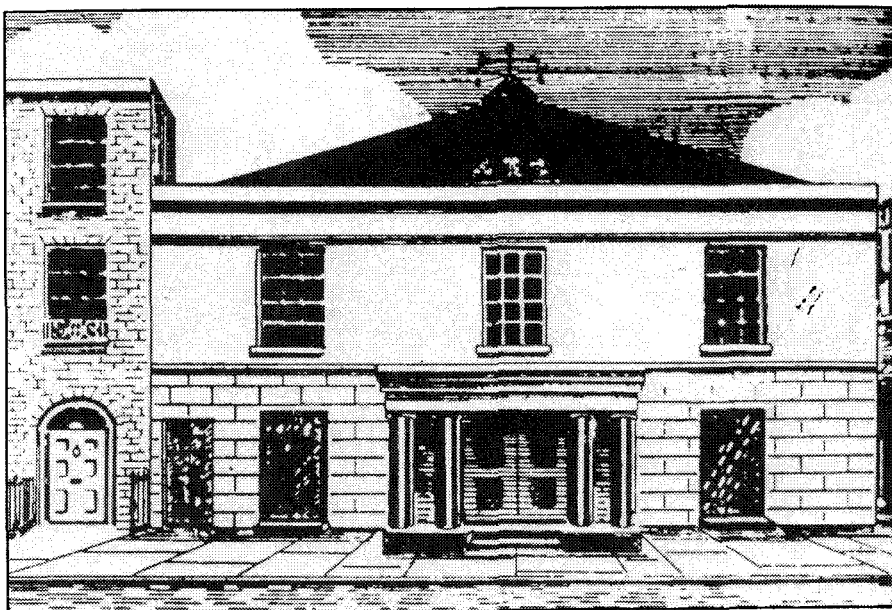
1891, *Ivanhoe*, based on Sir Walter Scott's novel, was produced at the Royal English Opera House in London. The leading role was given to the great Welsh tenor, Ben Davies, with Joseph O'Mara as understudy. However, early in the run of the opera O'Mara got his chance, and his performance was sensational. From that on, he alternated with Davies, both appearing for three nights each week.

From that period onwards, the career of Joseph O'Mara was one of uninterrupted success both in the operatic stage and on the concert platform. Sir Augustus Harris, a prominent impresario, was impressed and, in 1893, engaged Joseph O'Mara for the Italian opera. By this time, he had built up a large operatic repertoire. His versatility was extraordinary. The artist who could 'bring down the house' as Myles in the favourite *Lily of Killarney*, could also triumph in the monumental role of the Knight of the Holy Grail in Wagner's *Lohengrin*. Indeed, it was in *Lohengrin* that he made his farewell performance when he retired in 1926. In 1894, he made his first appearance at Covent Garden in London, where he was one of a company which included Emma Calvé, one of the greatest artists of the period and famous for her performance as Carmen. The Australian singer, Dame Nellie Melba, and the brothers, Jean and Edward de Reszke, were also in the cast. The same year brought a tour of all the principal cities of Ireland, England and Scotland. In 1896, he created the part of Mike Murphy in the first performance of Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien*, and one of the few recordings made by him, imperfect as it is, and which I am happy to have in my possession, is from that opera. In the same year, he had his third season in succession at Covent Garden, quite a record at that time. As well as appearing in opera, he had great success on the concert stage, including two visits to America.

Joseph O'Mara was again in Covent Garden, in 1902 and 1903, this time with the Moody-Manners Opera Company, which included, in addition to Charles Manners and Fanny Moody, such well known artists as John Coates and Zelig de Lussan, who was to appear as Carmen with O'Mara in the Theatre Royal in Limerick in 1913.

Following these successes, Joseph O'Mara formed his own opera company, with which he toured widely until his retirement. Puccini's dramatic and demanding work, *La Tosca*, had its first performance in Rome in 1900, and its first Irish performance took place in the Theatre Royal in Dublin in 1910, with Joseph O'Mara and Fanny Moody in the leading roles.

Other artists who were to appear with the O'Mara Opera Company over the years included the Clonmel-born Frank Land, a baritone who is now forgotten, but who was once idolised, particularly in Limerick which he came to love, and where he died and was buried in Mount



The Theatre Royal. Drawing by J.F. Walsh.

St. Laurence cemetery. Flintoff Moore, famous for his performance as Rigoletto, was the leading baritone, and lighter tenor roles were taken by Alphonso McCarthy, a native of Limerick. In October, 1908, the Limerick Corporation made Joseph O'Mara a freeman of his native city. Towards the end of his career, he frequently gave his singing services to the church. I only heard him on three occasions, the first being in the Redemptorist Church, when, as a small boy, I was brought to hear him sing after the 12 o'clock Mass one Sunday. Later, as a schoolboy, in 1924, I heard him sing Gounod's "Ave Maria" in the Jesuit Church.

Early in 1927, there were celebrations to mark the seventh centenary of the Dominican order in Limerick, and these included a gala concert in the Lyric Theatre, during which Joseph O'Mara made his final appearance. He was supported by a well known baritone, J.C. Doyle, and Joan Bourke, mezzo-soprano both from Dublin, as well as by some Limerick performers, of whom I can

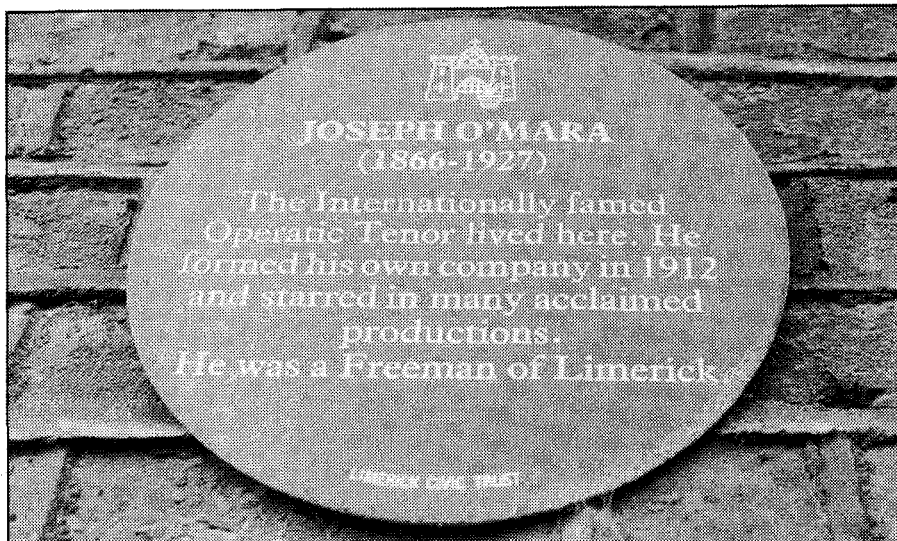
remember Nan Griffin, John Cahill, Mrs. Jack Hartigan and Eddie Bourke. The accompanist was a Belgian musician, Henri Begas, then organist and choir-master in the Dominican Church.

Joseph O'Mara did not long survive that appearance. He died on 5 August, 1927, at the age of sixty-one, leaving behind him the memory of a great actor and singer, and a kindly gentleman.

Today, we can be proud that the bright torch of culture and artistry, which burned so brightly in the time of Catherine Hayes, the "Swan of Erin" and Joseph O'Mara, has passed to another daughter of our city, the beautiful accomplished Suzanne Murphy, who has brought the art of operatic performance to many of the great opera houses of the world. And so the tradition goes on. With the words of a forgotten poet, which I learned in my childhood, I conclude my tribute to Joseph O'Mara:

Limerick the nurse of heroes, honour's crest,

By beauty gemmed, Circassia of the West.
Circassia of the West.



Civic Trust plaque at Oznam House, Hartstonge Street.