



THE MESSAGE OF THE BLUEBIRD STAGED IN THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

By H. David Vuckson

In mid-November of 1923 an original Canadian light opera entitled *The Message of The Bluebird* was presented in the Collingwood Grand Opera House on two evenings plus one afternoon matinee. The composer, who also played a principal role in the three act opera, was Asa Huycke [pronounced "Hike"] of Peterborough, then in his early thirties. His father's ancestry was Dutch, his mother's Irish.

Andrew C. "Asa" Huycke (1891-1972), the son of a blacksmith was a gifted musician. Employed at John P. Cunningham's Peterborough Music Company as a salesman and piano tuner from his early twenties onward, he also composed ballads, waltzes and marches which were published by the Peterborough Music Company. He is also said to be the originator of a piano teaching method. Like other song writers such as Irving Berlin and Lionel Bart (composer of *Oliver!*) who needed "musical secretaries" to write down their melodies for them, Huycke could not read or write musical notation. He played "by ear". Cathleen McCarthy, in a 1975 history of the Peterborough Grand Opera House recounted, "Asa Huycke, a local genius at the keyboard—although at

the time he could not read a single note of written music—composed a delightful musical operetta, *The Message of The Bluebird*, which was presented several times at the [Peterborough Grand] Opera House with full houses. A local music teacher, the late Miss Margaret McCabe, sat beside Mr. Huycke as he played and wrote down the musical score, composing the bass later. It was quite a feat.”

His opera appears to have played to great acclaim and capacity houses in a number of Ontario cities and towns throughout 1923. The actual “message” of the opera was *“And someday a lovely bluebird straight out of the skies of blue singing its song of happiness will come wending its way to you”*.

In the communities where the opera was performed it often served as a fund raiser on behalf of a women’s group. In Bowmanville, it was the Bowmanville Hospital Women’s Auxiliary; in Barrie it was the Royal Victoria Hospital Women’s Auxiliary who realized \$291.26 from this endeavour—equivalent to \$4106.13 in purchasing power in 2017. In Collingwood the opera appeared under the auspices of the Major E. L. Knight Chapter of the I.O.D.E.—the same group that brought Stephen Leacock to Collingwood in 1917—as part of their charitable work.

The story is set mostly in Switzerland and on board a ship bound for America. It tells of the trials of a Swiss shepherd boy Marcel (played by the composer) in his search for happiness and true love. The plot and the musical numbers sound like something W. S. Gilbert would have written with happy couples pairing off at the end. You have to wonder if Huycke’s musical score sounded similar to the music Sir Arthur Sullivan would set to Gilbert’s words when it contains choruses such as, “See we dance the merry measure” and “She’s a rip of a ship” and solos

like “I am a Count of no account” and “I am a Prince of pots and pans”, just a few of the “twenty-four catchy musical numbers in the score”.

The Collingwood production in the Grand Opera House on November 14th and 15th (Wednesday and Thursday) had a twelve piece orchestra plus conductor, an adult chorus of “peasants, passengers, sailors, ladies’ maids, etc.” numbering 40 and an enormous children’s chorus numbering 111 although I doubt that all of them were on the stage at any one time—there wouldn’t have been room for any scenery. In that 1923 children’s chorus were my mother Catharine Hewson, age 11, her cousin, Louise Storey (Dr. Bob Storey’s sister) and Louise’s future husband Charles Thompson. Among the orchestra were some familiar names from the Kiltie Band: Alan Dixon, Harvard Connolly and Bert Brown, a neighbour of mine (in his old age) on Ste. Marie St. Mrs. David A. Manson, my grandmother’s across-the-back-fence neighbour, whose husband just happened to have a piano store on Hurontario St. in 1923 and possibly furnished the piano for these performances, was the pianist. Some of the many well-known Collingwood surnames from that era in the cast included: Smart, Kohl, Hewson, Storey, Shipley, Brophy, Bunting, Stoutenburg, Sandell, Dey, Russ, Armitage, Guilfoyle, Teskey, Qua, Boadway and Toner.

Admission was 75 cents for reserved seats, 50 cents for “rush” seats, and for the Wednesday matinee, children were admitted for 15 cents. The evening performances were scheduled for 8:15 sharp, although at one performance in Bowmanville in April of that year, the audience had to wait until 8:40 p.m. At the closing of that performance and after the singing of the National Anthem “all those taking part surrounded Mr. Huycke on the stage and sang ‘For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow’ and ‘Auld Lang Syne’ while the delighted audience was dispersing”.

Somehow the promise of happiness of *The Message of The Bluebird* and the adulation the composer received from it didn't last. Huycke is not listed in Peterborough City Directories from 1924 on. It is not known how long his opera was "on the road". His family was not without its tragedies. His mother had died in 1921 of kidney disease. His younger sister died in 1924 at age 26 of Pulmonary Tuberculosis and Meningitis. The Peterborough Music Company appears to have gone out of business with the death of its proprietor in December 1927 also throwing Huycke's older sister Gertrude out of work as their bookkeeper (she appears to have lived out her life as an elderly spinster in the Village of Lanark). Huycke's father had remarried in 1924 and died in 1934; in early January 1936 his stepmother died. In May, 1936 this "jolly good fellow", now in his mid-forties, had his name in the *Ottawa Journal* for quite a different reason than a bluebird of happiness when a member of a rowing club happened to look out the clubhouse window just as Asa Huycke was about to throw himself into the St. Lawrence River while drunk. A quick shout dissuaded him from doing this and instead he received a jail sentence of 18 days for intoxication. At the time he was described as "a former church organist in a Peterborough church and now a travelling piano tuner". There was no mention of his longsuffering wife Annie.

Huycke may well have fallen on hard times during the Great Depression, seeking relief from his misery in alcohol. The piano business had actually already been in a slow decline since the middle of the prosperous "Roaring Twenties" as people turned more to radio, gramophone records, and "talking pictures" for their entertainment. It was much easier to "play" the radio than to learn to play a piano and a radio cost much less and took up much less floor and wall space than a

piano. What changing tastes in entertainment started, the Great Depression accelerated with a frightening intensity, forcing a multitude of piano factories to close their doors forever because their products were not wanted. Even though there were vast numbers of pianos around, there probably was not much work for Huycke because not many people could afford to have their pianos tuned in the 1930's (if they ever tuned them at all) when, in some cases, they may have barely had money for a loaf of bread.

In any case, Huycke survived this attempted suicide episode. He appears to have moved around quite a bit. He was in Hamilton in 1930; in 1935, Smiths Falls; in 1945 he was in Belleville. In mid-November 1949 he was back in Hamilton when he and his wife crossed Lake Ontario to Buffalo. His reason for entering the United States was that he had a bronchial condition and wanted to get to a warmer climate for the winter; he did not return to Canada until the following April. He continued tuning pianos in the Onondaga area south-west of Hamilton in the 1950's and up into the 60's when he was in his early 70's. He lived to the age of 81 and is buried in the Pleasant Hill Cemetery, Onondaga Township, Brant County, Ontario.

The Message of The Bluebird appears to be long forgotten since those southern and central Ontario performances 94 years ago. The Collingwood people who participated on the stage and in the orchestra for the production have all passed on, having had their turn on the greater stage of life itself. Even the Collingwood Grand Opera House, once the community gathering place, is long-gone, having made way for a different kind of gathering place—the Arena—in the late 1940's.

Perhaps a dusty, sepia-coloured-with-age and crumbling copy of the score still exists somewhere in an archive, a library, perhaps in a box of junk dropped off at a recycling depot or maybe even waiting to be discovered in someone's attic along with a stack of 78 rpm records or even a box of Edison cylinders. We may never know for sure how the musical numbers sounded, but it is certain from the newspaper accounts of the day that this all-Canadian production delighted Simcoe County audiences in Collingwood, Barrie and Alliston in 1923. It entertained the local residents in an era when going out to concerts and live theatre was a sense of occasion and a major community gathering in the days before movies with sound and decades before television became a reality. (People dressed up for such events whereas now some attending operas and symphony orchestra concerts show up in T-shirts and shorts and torn jeans.) If a copy of Huycke's score should be found and a video recording of a studio performance made, it would provide us with a time capsule of a bygone era.

At least one piece of Huycke's music is still performed today. In 1916 he composed a Military March entitled *Irresistible* that was "*Respectfully Dedicated To Lieut.-Col. Johnston, Officers, Band and Men 93rd Overseas Battalion, Peterboro, Can.*" of the Canadian Expeditionary Force just before the unit departed for Europe. Today, the March is part of the music library of the Peterborough Concert Band and there is a video on the Internet of the band playing *Irresistible* on a very windy summer's day in an octagonal-shaped Victorian era bandstand in Riverview Park And Zoo, Peterborough (similar to the bandstand we used to have in Central Park in Collingwood) although the sound quality is not the best due to the wind. The wind notwithstanding, this video evokes memories of a bygone era of band

concerts in the park such as were common in Collingwood fifty years ago at Sunset Point with the Collingwood Civic Band.

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