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WILFRID PELLETIER

BY EMMETT M. FORD, The AMICA Jan/Feb 1978

Wilfrid Pelletier, pianist, conductor of opera and symphony, piano roll and phonograph recording artist, was born in Montreal, Canada, June 20, 1896. At an early age he showed an aptitude for music and studied piano with his father. The timpani fascinated the boy and his parents, realizing he was destined for a musical career, launched him in studies of composition and harmony. His capacity for work equaled his musical gifts and at the age of seventeen he was engaged as assistant conductor of the Montreal Opera Company.

In 1914 he won the Province of Quebec Prix d'Europe Scholarship enabling him to go to Paris where piano study was with the famous pianist and teacher, Isidor Phillip; composition with the famous organist, Widor; harmony with Marcel Rosseau, and opera tradition and repertoire with Camille Bellaigue.

Returning to the U.S. in 1917, he became a coach at the Metropolitan Opera. His first rehearsal was Saint-Saens' opera "Samson et Delilah." The cast included Caruso, Matzenauer and Whitehill. He continued at the Met proving a conscientious worker in preparing the operas for the principal conductors. Later Mr. Pelletier became assistant conductor of the Metropolitan Opera for the French and Italian repertoire and in 1931 was appointed the principal conductor. During the years with the Met he conducted German, Russian, French and Italian repertoire, both classic and modern and also prepared and conducted a number of American works. During his long stay with the Met he coached famous singers, such as Caruso, Bori,

Gigli, Farrar, Lily Pons, Grace Moore and Rose Bampton in many of their famous roles.

Later he toured the country as conductor for the Scotti Opera Company and conducted the Ravina Opera for nine years. Mr. Pelletier conducted the Chicago Orchestra for the premiere of Deems Taylor's opera, "Peter Ibbetson."

In Chicago in 1925 he married the singer Quenna Mario but the marriage ended in a divorce in 1936. A year later he married the soprano, Rose Bampton.

In 1935 he made his debut in radio in the Simmons Hour, the Firestone Program and conducted an orchestra in a weekly NBC radio program in the Packard concerts which starred the famous American baritone, Lawrence Mr. Pelletier coached Mr. Tibbet for his role in the opera, "Faust." He served as Musical Director and

Conductor of the Met Auditions of the Air from 1933 to 1936. In 1933 he conducted the NBC Orchestra for the National Opera Concerts starring famous singers of the operatic stage and he also conducted tabloid versions of famous opera broadcasts from the NBC studios.

Beginning in 1935 his activities were between New York City and Montreal where in the latter he founded and conducted the Orchestra Symphonique. In 1938 he conducted the opera sequences featuring Kirsten Flagstad in the motion picture, "Big Broadcast of 1938".

In 1942 he became director of the Quebec Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Arts. The Canadian government honored him with the order of St. Michael and St. George.* He also founded the Bach Festivals of Montreal, making a tour of South Africa.

His conductorship of the San Francisco Opera Company began in 1947 and one performance was the opera "Emperor Jones" with Lawrence Tibbett singing the title role. This was the west coast premiere of the opera. His term as conductor with the San Francisco Opera was for ten years and he was also conductor with the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra.

From 1954 to 1957 the Children's Concerts were given by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Mr. Pelletier. The organization of the Children's Concerts in Montreal gave him the title of Musical Godfather of the Children of Canada. Of all the Metropolitan Opera conductors, Mr. Pelletier has the longest session from 1917 to 1950.

Mr. Pelletier's piano rolls are potpourris of operas and ballets in partnership with pianist Arthur Loesser. The solo piano rolls are his playing of his arrangements of operas.

Some outstanding phonograph recordings are his accompaniment to soprano Maria Jeritza and his wife, Rose Bampton - the latter recorded on a 78 rpm Victor (10-118) of Carpenter's "The Sleep That Flits on Baby's Eyes," and Hageman's "Do Not Go, My Love."

He also recorded an abridged version of Verdi's "Otello" with members of the Metropolitan Opera, which were Tibbett, Martinelli, and Jepson.

Mr. Pelletier has been awarded many honors which are: DM at the University of Montreal, University Laval, the University of Alberta, New York College of Music, and the University of Ottawa; a Doctor of Letters at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, the Legion of Honor of France, Companion Christian Dentlendes (Denmark), and Companion of the Order of Canada.

(My thanks to Mr. Pelletier for reading and approving this sketch; Mr. Arthur Kaplan, Public Relations Department - San Francisco Opera; Mrs. John DeWitt Peltz, archivist of the Metropolitan Opera, and the National Broadcasting Company for their cooperation in sending me important information.

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More on Mr. Pelletier can be found at [The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada - William Pelletier](#)