The Imperial Choir at Ghent

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Obituary.

We regret to have to report the following deaths :

BENJAMIN AGUTTER, Mus. Doc., F.R.C.O., at the age of sixty-nine. Dr. Agutter was organist of St. Peter's, Leigham Court Road, Streatham, from 1868 to 1905. He was a native of St. Alban's, and attended the Grammar School there. In 1870, at the age of twenty-five, he obtained the degree of Bachelor of Music at Oxford. Besides his ability as an organist and personal influence as a musician, Dr. Agutter had a claim to high respect as a composer. His Mass in B flat obtained wide acceptance.

MADAME SUSANNA COLE (Mrs. Offord), on June 18, at the Home for Invalids, Holy Innocents' Road, Hornsey. A sketch of her career was given in our issue for October, 1912.

THOMAS POPPLEWELL ROYLE, M.A., Mus. Bac. Oxon., organist of the Chapel Royal, Savoy.

THE IMPERIAL CHOIR AT GHENT.

The visit of 2,000 members of the Imperial Choir of London to Ghent Exhibition was a unique and noteworthy event. Never before had so large a choir left these shores to perform as one unit in a foreign land. It was a bold enterprise even for Dr. Harriss to undertake, and it was conceived in a fine spirit. It is a pleasure to record that notwithstanding contretemps for which no one on this side was responsible, it was achieved with credit to all concerned. To transport two thousand singers from London to Ghent, and board and lodge them, and give three highly-successful concerts, and bring the whole party back safely, was no mean feat of organization. Special trains and boats were requisitioned, and the hotel accommodation was generally excellent. About seven hundred stayed at the handsome new Hotel Flandria, which can accommodate about two thousand guests. I was billeted with this group, and can bear testimony to the excellent management of the establishment. The commissariat department, so far as it was catered for outside the hotels, was not satisfactory. But being very well fed myself, I thought it was almost providential that the singers had to bear something in order to bring out the Christian fortitude they were able to display after justifiable grumbling had found expressive vent.

The great majority of the Choir travelled on Friday night (May 30). The crossing via Dover and Ostend was quiet.

Arrived at Ghent at about six o'clock, the various hotels were visited, and the whole party assembled in a large apartment in the Exhibition for breakfast. This meal was somewhat of a failure. Then the Choir assembled at 10 a.m. in the Palais des Fêtes for a rehearsal with the band—a splendid orchestra of 110 performers, imported from Brussels. After that the visitors were free to rove over the beautiful Exhibition. At 3 p.m., the first concert was given in the Palais des Fêtes. This is a substantial building of no architectural pretence, but admirably adapted for large gatherings. It was brilliantly lighted, and had a very cheerful appearance. It affords seating and standing accommodation for about 10,000 persons. The large orchestral platform used on this occasion held the huge choir and the band quite comfortably, and the graduation of the rise brought everyone under the eye of the conductor.

The audience at this concert was a good one, but it did not fill the hall. It was, however, a very generously enthusiastic audience. Although by a regrettable omission the programme merely gave the names of the pieces to be performed, and not a scrap of information as to what they were about, an astonishing amount of interest was displayed. The appeal was to absolute music, *Lieder ohne Worte*; and presumably it would have been as effective to them if the singers had not troubled about words. The concert opened with the Belgian National Anthem, which had been arranged for the occasion by Sir Alexander Mackenzie. This was sung in French, and it says something for Londoners' acquisitiveness that the words of this piece at least were recognised. Foreigners are well known to be merciful in this matter. Of course the whole audience was standing, and the military attendants were all

saluting. At the conclusion there was a remarkable demonstration. The singers had been provided with little flags attached to sticks, and immediately after the anthem had been sung these flags were waved excitedly, and the Choir shouted cheers for the King of the Belgians. A striking moment! The Choir and the audience were now on good terms. Now came our own 'God save the King' (Elgar's fine arrangement). This was followed by more frantic flag-wagging, more cheers and counter-cheers from every part of the building, and then all settled down for the concert proper. It was soon evident that the huge choir was well under control. The tone was pure and sweet, and the attack was remarkably good; not once was there anything approaching a failure, every piece being performed so steadily. I heard 'O Gladsome Light' from the far end of the hall, and was arrested by the excellence of the blend. This piece caught the fancy of the audience, and it was loudly encored. Coleridge-Taylor's picturesque chorus from 'Kubla Khan' was sung with much effective colour. Elgar's 'Lullaby' was another successful item, the tone and refined execution of the contraltos making a strong appeal. The 'Marksman' needed more dash and rhythmic grip than it obtained from these greatly spread-out resources. Finally came Dr. Harriss's 'Pan' (the briefest title on record?). This is an elaborate work for choir, orchestra, and four soloists. It presents the composer at his best, the orchestration especially being effective. A modern idiom is employed, and there are numerous bold rhythmic and tonal effects—sometimes rhapsodic in nature—that present considerable difficulty. I should not like to vouch for the correction of the choral performance (a full orchestra bountifully employed covers a multitude of choral sins), but it is satisfactory to record that there were splendid moments in the choral climaxes and that there was some delicate part-singing, especially by the female voices. All the soloists were of course efficient. I wondered whether ever before these distinguished singers had sung standing on a not very capacious table. All fear as to its strength was happily disposed of when Mr. Ben Davies climbed down after his first solo. At the conclusion of the concert there was again a great deal of applause, and then the tired choralists sought well-earned repose.

Sunday (June 1) was a misery. It rained and blew pitilessly from morn till eve. It was distressing to see the thousands of men, women, and children in gay attire arriving at the station and trudging drenched through the streets and the sodden and muddy Exhibition roads. It was a fête-day, and amongst the allurements were the Imperial Choir concert and another event of transcendent importance—the prize-fight between Bombardier Wells and Carpentier. The Exhibition grounds were a sorry sight. People were huddled up in search of shelter from the merciless downpour. The numerous cafés did a roaring trade. At least they were warm, and they provided for that odd desire for inward wetting that comes of an outward soaking. It was significant that comparatively few sought consolation and shelter in the splendid picture galleries with their soothing, soft drapery—their sometimes bizarre wall-paper that seemed to kill the colour-schemes of the pictures—and their soft, noiseless floor covering. In the grounds there were numerous notice-boards which indicated where what were called the 'attractions' (water-chutes and the fun of the fair generally) were to be found. But picture galleries and exhibits did not come in this category. The Exhibition buildings have splendid features. The approach from the principal entrance gates presents an imposing view. There is a grand sweep in the great design which combines strength and simplicity, and yet details are full of interest. For all those whose taste lies in the direction of exhibitions there is much to be studied with profit and interest. The city itself has attractive features, but these are soon exhausted.

The possible effect of the weather on the spirits of the Choir and upon the hoped-for large audience was a depressing thought. During the early evening thousands of visitors were disconsolately leaving the town. But notwithstanding all the signs and portents, the Choir assembled cheerily, and an audience of a few thousand persons was there to welcome them. The programme presented was a miscellaneous one, many of the items of the previous night's programme being repeated. It was a sort

of recognition of Sunday that shopkeepers who open on that day adopt when they put one shutter up. John E. West's anthem, 'Light's glittering morn,' was a very successful number, the orchestra affording much support. Elgar's chorus, 'It comes from the misty ages,' was another selection that brought out the tone and execution of the Choir with splendid effect. As at the former concert, the two National Anthems were performed, and again excited great enthusiasm.

Thus ended the musical demonstration so far as the great bulk of the Choir was concerned. Some went home that night, but the majority left next day or the following night.

On Monday (June 2) the special event was a 'command' performance given by about 300 members of the Choir (assisted by about 40 members of the orchestra) before the King of the Belgians at his Palace at Laeken, near Brussels. This was a memorable occasion for all who took part. The select choir left Ghent in the morning, and arrived at Brussels about noon. Here an excellent luncheon was provided, and then the whole party was taken by specially reserved tram-cars to the gates of the Palace. After being conducted through about a quarter of a mile of conservatories the Choir were ushered into a domed orangery, also part of the conservatories, where arrangements had been made for the concert to be held. His Majesty had been unavoidably detained owing to an accident on the railway on which he was travelling, and the concert was therefore somewhat delayed. When he appeared Dr. Harriss, who was attired in the gorgeous panoply of his Doctor's robes, was presented, and soon after this ceremony the concert commenced. The choral programme, which was surely much too long for such an occasion, consisted of the items starred in the complete selection of the Choir subjoined. It was listened to with exemplary patience. At its close His Majesty spoke to Dr. Harriss about the work of the Imperial Choir, and the company was led to another large apartment in which an ample repast was supplied. The King himself attended this function, and talked genially in English to the various persons presented to him. This kindly recognition and welcome by the greatest personage in the country visited was a highly satisfactory rounding-off of the whole scheme of the visit.

If this new idea of organizing visits of the Imperial Choir to foreign countries is to be further developed, the question of the programmes to be presented will call for serious consideration. Is it the mission of the Choir to help to cement the union of nations solely by British music? If so, I fear the cement will not hold. At Ghent one yearned for an immense uplifting and profound effect such as might be obtained by the performance of a Bach Chorale—'Ein feste burg'—or, say, the 'Sanctus' from the B minor Mass. The bond sought for must be created by music with a cosmopolitan appeal.

The following are translations of Belgian newspaper criticisms on the singing of the Choir:

The Journal de Gand.—It will astonish no one to read that yesterday's concert was a success. The Imperial Choir, the largest in the world, was preceded by a brilliant reputation, which on the whole it well deserved. We base our judgment principally on the executive powers of the Choir. Never before has it been our privilege to admire such discipline, such unity, and such balance in a choral body comprising no less than 2,000 singers. Effects of remarkable unity were drawn from the singers by Dr. Charles Harriss's baton. This was well exemplified in Sullivan's evening hymn ('O Gladsome Light'), which, however, does not bristle with difficulties. In this connection Stanford's 'The Old Superb' gave a better proof. The interplay of vocal parts was more restless and was not, as in the majority of the choruses, a continual battery. . . . One last remark, Why not distribute texts and analytical notes on such works as 'Pan'? The works themselves would gain, and we would then know precisely what they were all about.

La Flandre Libérale.—It was to the largest choir in the world, the 'Imperial Choir' of London, conducted by Dr. Charles Harriss, that the Musical Committee of the Exposition entrusted the mission of making known the condition of contemporary British music. The first concert of this Choir took place yesterday evening in the large Hall of the Palais des Fêtes, with the assistance of the Ysaye Orchestra from Brussels. . . .

The Imperial Choir comprises no less than 2,000 singers, and we will not deny that we had certain apprehensions as to the cohesion and the pliability of so large a choral body, for there is, of course, a limit to the intimacy attainable between a conductor and his singers, and we wondered whether with 2,000 the limit would be exceeded. . . .

As soon as the Choir had sung the 'Brabanconne' our fears vanished. And when the fine National Anthem 'God save the King' was given we were seized with emotion—it was wonderful. What we regretted at this moment was that the programme did not contain the Triumphant chorus from 'Judas Maccabæus,' or the 'Hallelujah' from the 'Messiah.' How impressively the Imperial Choir would have sung them! . . .

The singers are admirably disciplined. They obey the baton of their conductor as an organ responds to the finger of the organist. At a sign from Dr. Harriss the 2,000 voices begin together, cease together, make their *nuances*, and vary their sonority as if they were but one powerful instrument. And what a superb instrument! How fine the tone which filled the vast hall yesterday. It is to its impeccable accuracy that the Imperial Choir owes its fine tonal effects.

W. G. MCN.

PROGRAMME.

- *The Belgian National Anthem.
- *The British National Anthem *Arr. Elgar*
- *Chorus, 'Forward, through the glimmering darkness' ('War and Peace') *Parry*
- *Air, 'Onaway, awake, beloved.' *Coleridge-Taylor*
- *Evening hymn; 'O Gladsome Light' ('Golden Legend') *Sullivan*
- Overture, 'Britannia' *Mackenzie*
- *Chorus, 'The dome of pleasure' ('Kubla Khan') *Coleridge-Taylor*
- Songs with choruses *Stanford*
- (a) 'Drake's drum.' (b) 'The Old Superb.'
- Scenes from 'The Bavarian Highlands' *Elgar*
- * (a) 'Lullaby' (b) 'The Marksman.'
- *A Symphonic Choric Idyll, 'Pan' *Harriss*
- Chorus, 'Lord of Life' ('Jubilee Ode') *Mackenzie*
- Chorus, 'The March triumphal thunders' ('Caractacus') *Elgar*
- Air, 'Were there not reeds enough' ('Pan') *Harriss*
- Chorus, 'For Empire and for King' *Fletcher*
- Easter song, 'Light's glittering morn' *John E. West*
- Duet, 'How sweet the moonlight sleeps' ('Kenilworth') *Sullivan*
- Chorus, 'God sent His messenger' ('The Golden Legend') *Sullivan*
- *Song with chorus, 'Land of Hope and Glory' *Elgar*
- Chorus, 'It comes from the misty ages' ('The Banner of St. George') *Elgar*

The Choir comprised contingents from the following:

- Alexandra Palace Choral Society.
- Barking Choral Society.
- Bermondsey Settlement Choral Society.
- Bexley Heath Choral Society.
- Brixton Oratorio Choir.
- Bromley Choral Society.
- Buckhurst Hill Choral Society.
- Mr. William Carter's Choir.
- Central London Choral Society.
- Chingford Choral Society.
- Chiswick and Gunnersbury Philharmonic Society
- City of London College Choir.
- 'Dulwich' section, Imperial Choir.
- Ealing Choral Society.
- Ealing Philharmonic Society.
- East Ham Choral Society.
- Edward Mason Choir.
- Hither Green Choral Society.
- Ilford Choral Society.
- Lavender Hill Choral Society.
- Lewisham Choral Society.
- London Gleemen.
- London Sunday School Choir.
- The Novello Choir.
- Penge and Beckenham Choral Society.

* Sung at the Royal Command Concert.

People's Palace Choral Society.
 Polytechnic Choral Society.
 Royal Choral Society.
 South London Choral Association.
 South-West Choral Society.
 Streatham Hill Choral Society.
 St. John's Musical Society.
 St. Peter's (Brockley) Choral Society.
 St. Saviour's (Denmark Hill) Choral Society.
 St. Saviour's (Highbury) Male-Voice Choir.
 St. Stephen's (Paddington) Choral Society.
 Teddington Philharmonic Society.
 Walthamstow Choral Union.
 West Norwood Choral Society.
 Willesden Green and Harrow Choral Society.

The soloists were Miss Esta d'Argo, Miss Gertrude Lonsdale, Mr. Ben Davies, and Mr. Wilfrid Douthitt. Dr. Charles Harriss conducted all the concerts.

ROYAL OPERA, COVENT GARDEN.

Without achieving anything of any very great note, the season at the Royal Opera has pursued its course to date. Signor Caruso has put in a large number of the special performances he was engaged for. He will not reach the original figure proposed, for he has announced himself as being in need of a holiday, and will therefore cut short his visit. That visit has been pleasant enough, but the Syndicate has made the mistake of charging double prices. It is not all quite so wonderful as that. Moreover, the tendency of operatic prices should be to lower, not raise themselves, if anything like permanent public support is to be secured. High prices, coupled with the fact that if Signor Caruso is greater than ever as an actor there is also some falling off on the vocal side, do not match. Consequently all the two-guinea stalls have not always been occupied. In the matter of characters he has not ventured out of the well-beaten track. Radames ('Aïda'), Rodolfo ('La Bohème') and Cavaradossi ('La Tosca') have proved sufficient, crowned by a 'command' performance of 'La Bohème' with Madame Melba as Mimi. This brings us to that admirable woman. She has not feared to acknowledge to five and twenty years at Covent Garden, and has duly celebrated the occasion. The public took their share in it—the opera was 'La Bohème'—and overwhelmed her with floral tributes until she herself was overwhelmed in tears and was moved to make a graceful speech. Moreover, she has made further concession by appearing once again as Marguerite in Gounod's 'Faust.' Then there has been the special celebration of the Saint-Saëns Festival. The operatic side of that undertaking proved the more popular. The public were much interested to see *in propria persona* the composer who has charmed them with his music, and they cheered lustily when he came on the stage between the Acts to receive wreaths, one of them bigger than himself. It was a great occasion, and a very good performance. Madame Kirkby Lunn was there to repeat her fine delineation of the undoer of Samson, and as Samson, M. Paul Franz made his first appearance this season, singing and acting with even more effect than before, and showing on the vocal side at least unquestionable development in his art. M. Dinh Gilly (High Priest), M. Crabbé (Abimelech), and M. Huberdeau (Hebrew Elder) were the chief participants in this event. Signor Polacco, the new conductor, directed, and provided an entirely new and decidedly good reading of the score. M. Debussy's 'Pelléas et Mélisande' has come into the field again after being shut out for a year, and Madame Edvina and M. Maguenat (a new-comer) as the two chief characters, provided a due proportion of the nebulosity typical of the work; M. André Caplet (his first appearance) and the orchestra did the rest, not forgetting the clever scene-painters. Last year's novelty, Wolf-Ferrari's 'Jewels of the Madonna,' has been played, and 'Madama Butterfly' has shown that she retains her hold on the public. Miss Alice Neilsen was a sprightly exponent, and then Madame Destinn with Mr. John McCormack, and then Signor Martinelli as the forgetful lieutenant, with both M. Gilly and Signor Sammarco as the Consul in turn have given its music. M. Charpentier's 'Louise'

has once more shown itself to be firmly established in popular esteem, especially with the help of Madame Edvina and M. Franz. M. Aquistapace, who is a new and promising member of the company, appeared as the Father, and did so in a new and promising fashion. Madame Bérat as the Mother, and the well-managed stage pictures, were as telling as ever. Again there was an individual reading from Signor Polacco. The list concludes with one solitary performance of 'La Traviata,' for the sake of Madame Melba, who seems to be the only living singer with the true faith as regards Verdi's music. In the conducting of 'Faust' and of other operas, Signor Panizza has had a helpful and sympathetic share.

FRANCIS E. BARRETT.

'ARIADNE IN NAXOS.'

Richard Strauss's latest opera, which was produced with much éclat at Stuttgart last October, was brought to a hearing in this country by the commendable joint-enterprise of Sir Herbert Tree and Mr. Thomas Beecham. Eight performances were given at His Majesty's Theatre, the first on May 27 and the last on June 7.

When Molière in his 'Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme' allowed the pupil of the music-master to compose music for the entertainment of M. Jourdain's guests, he did not dream that the incident would be amplified into a full-blown opera by the collaboration of such a dramatist as Hugo Von Hofmannsthal and a world-famous musician. In the original play the dancing-master was also expected to contribute an item to the entertainment, and in the modern version this grows into a fantastic, impossible 'Nachspiel,' the plot of which revolves around the inconstant amours of Zerbinetta, who is pursued by four lovers. The musician's work is in quite another vein. Ariadne, in an uncomfortable cave on a desert island, weeps copiously over the desertion of Theseus, but in the end is easily consoled by Bacchus. Then, besides the two pieces, there are to be fireworks for the amusement of the guests. Finding the timetable impracticable, and resolving to have everything he has paid for, the egregious M. Jourdain settles that the two pieces must be performed simultaneously. Dismay for author and composer and chaos for performers! But it is a case of that or nothing, and a sorry compromise has to be hurriedly arranged. So we have here Hofmannsthal's play, a strange medley, quaint as a child's fairy-story, casual and inconsequent. This concoction is performed to M. Jourdain's guests, who intersperse occasional criticisms.

An adaptation of Molière's original comedy precedes the opera. For the English presentation this version has been adapted by Mr. Somerset Maugham under the title of 'The Perfect Gentleman.' It may be well to mention in this connection that a very readable translation of the German libretto of the opera, by Mr. Alfred Kalisch, has been issued. For the play, Strauss provides incidental music of very attractive quality. In fact for our part we enjoyed it rather more than we did the music to the opera: it is full of charm and daintiness. The music to the opera has many strong emotional appeals. The earlier part is especially flowing and melodious, and aptly fitted to the curiously fantastic situations that arise out of the mixed ideas of the concurrent plays. As the opera draws to a close, the love-making of Bacchus and Ariadne becomes tedious, and the Finale generally does not leave a wholly satisfactory feeling. The orchestration is peculiar. It calls for thirty-seven players, and among the instruments employed are a harmonium, a celeste, and a pianoforte (played by Mr. Vernon Warner).

The cast of the play included Sir Herbert Tree (M. Jourdain), and Miss Phyllis Neilson-Terry (Dorimene), and was generally very efficient. In the opera, Madame Eva von der Osten appeared as Ariadne in the earlier representations, and Madame Theo Drill-Orridge on later occasions. Madame Hermine Bosetti was an admirable Zerbinetta, and Herr Otto Marak was a fine Bacchus. He appeared only in the first performance, the part later being taken by Mr. Robert Hutt. Mr. Thomas Beecham conducted with his usual spirit and zeal. Sometimes he could not get the singers to agree with his *tempi*, but generally the performances were smooth. The opera was performed in German.