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The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR

JULY 1 1920

ADVANCE IN PRICES

In consequence of the recent heavy rise in the cost of production, and the substantial advances in wages and establishment charges, Messrs. Novello & Co. have to announce that a further increase in the price of their publications is imperative. From this date the cost of all books and music (except separately published folio songs and publications originally priced at over Twelve shillings) will be double that charged before the war.

The prices of all publications not now advanced remain as they were on June 30, 1920.

In accordance with the above statement the cost of THE MUSICAL TIMES will be Sixpence. The annual subscription (including postage) will be Seven shillings and sixpence.

MODERN BRITISH COMPOSERS

BY EDWIN EVANS

EPILOGUE: A PERSONAL EXPLANATION

One of the many disadvantages of a selective series of articles, such as that which I am now bringing to a conclusion, is that one's omissions are likely to be endowed with significance. In the near future I anticipate receiving much enlightenment concerning the reasons which led me to include this composer and exclude that other from my scheme, reasons which will be quite new to me, and, probably, very illuminating. In the circumstances, it would seem expedient for me to forestall some of the more obvious misconstructions of my purpose, even at the cost of a more frequent use of the personal pronoun than I have permitted myself in the course of these articles. After all, I nowhere committed myself to a complete survey of the subject, and the selection is my own responsibility, for which a personal explanation may be desirable.

In the first place, the title is to be taken in a strict sense. By modern British composers I do not mean merely those who are more or less alive in our midst, but those who are taking a lively and significant part in forming the repertoire of this generation of musicians. It may be that they are destined to be superseded in the next. Contemporary approval is not evidence in the court of musical history, and a critic who claimed finality of judgment would be fit only for employ-

ment in the Ministry of Fine Arts with which we are threatened. But that next generation of musicians will own to some kind of parentage. It will not merely happen, but it will grow upon the soil now fertilised by contemporary achievement. This aspect of the subject naturally limits the period to be dealt with. It excludes, to begin with, those great Victorian figures some of whom still stand at the head of the profession, and without whose names no historical treatment of modern British music would be complete. But although this exclusion is obviously justified, it is liable to misconstruction. Whilst it would be affectation on my part to suggest that those great names have given me memorable musical thrills, my memory goes back just far enough to convince me that they spent the most impressionable years of their lives under conditions which, far from being conducive to musical inspiration, made the mere survival of the musical instinct a stupendous triumph of man over his environment. To create an imaginative musical masterpiece in the England of the 'eighties would have required not a man but a demigod. I have the best of reasons for appreciating those conditions, for my own father's musical career was one that was deflected by them. If the old, absurd prejudice against English music is now visibly crumbling away, the change of attitude is in no small measure due to musicians who laboured the stony ground and tended the saplings, and though they have had their share of honour, the thought of what they went through makes me inclined to condone even their most tedious moments. Mere sentiment, if you like, but not even H. G. Wells can leave sentiment entirely out of history. That, however, does not affect their exclusion on purely chronological grounds.

The Edwardian names—that is to say, those which became prominent in the Edwardian period—are on a different footing. In the first place, so much has been written concerning the two foremost of them that I cannot feel it incumbent upon me to swell the volume. They are still too near to need advocacy, and not yet remote enough for the dispassionate criticism which only the verdict of posterity can substantiate. They make an imposing group of composers, great and small, and they set their stamp upon a period, but it is quite remarkable how faint is their influence upon their successors. One reason may be that recognition came to them more tardily than is the rule nowadays, and was accorded to a style that was already mature and did not appreciably develop afterwards. Their apparition was thus less a continuous influence than an exciting incident. The younger men heard their music and passed on, reserving their more alert attention for the progressive development of their contemporaries. Even if that were not so, chronological grounds alone would suffice to exclude these composers from the scope of these articles.

From that point onward difficulties begin to arise, as is inevitable in any delimitation of frontiers. It is really fortuitous that the difference in age

between the oldest and youngest composer whose works have been passed in review is almost exactly twenty years, but their works prove them to be of the same generation. There was of course a debatable territory to be considered between what was Edwardian and what was Georgian. I remember that I pondered long over J. B. McEwen. In a time when we have good reason to be proud of our chamber music his contributions to it have been both copious and of sterling worth. Moreover they have a reflective quality that makes them singularly attractive, and their idiom, if not precisely that of to-day, retains an uncommon freshness and vitality. It was with considerable reluctance that I drew the line in point of date between McEwen and Vaughan Williams, and even now I am not certain whether the right place of the former is not with his juniors. But there must be a division somewhere, and though mere dates carry little significance—there are quite young composers with Victorian views on music—they are serviceable as sign-posts.

The subject was thus narrowed down to a group of nine composers, of whom the eldest is now forty-seven and the youngest twenty-seven years old. That they happen to be of extremely varied types, having very little in common, is not the result of selection—it is symptomatic of the present activity of our musical world, which has become like a disturbed ant-hill. Certainly no other period of our own musical history has been equally productive, and it is very doubtful whether any other country could at present muster as goodly a group of its younger composers. Nevertheless, though all musical history proves that nine is a generous number of composers to allot to one generation in a single country, I know that I shall be reproached with some omissions. The first that suggests itself is that of Josef Holbrooke. I have before me as I write, an article on his music which I contributed to the *Musical Standard* of May 30, 1903, and which drew the attention of H. A. Fricker, with the result that, soon afterwards, Holbrooke's 'Queen Mab' was performed at the Leeds Festival. In those days Holbrooke was certainly a remarkable apparition, and one which justified the highest hopes. But seventeen years have elapsed. The terrestrial globe has rolled on, and Holbrooke's best works are still the symphonic poems which first made his name: 'Ulalume,' 'The Viking,' 'Queen Mab,' and so on. They have lost none of those qualities which then made them so vivid to us, but there has been much music written since, and they are not, to-day, as exceptional as they were in 1903. Time is inexorable. A creative artist who does not grow is doomed to shrink. For all Holbrooke's feverish productivity, which is undisciplined by self-criticism, and for all his dynamic, explosive musical eloquence, he does not fill the position in the musical world to-day that was promised him when he first enlivened the Promenade Concerts with 'Three Blind Mice.' In the definition given above, he is not at present of those who take a lively and significant part in

forming the répertoire of this generation. His contribution is dated, unless of course there is pending one of those cataclysmic revolutions of personality that occur occasionally in the lives of creative artists, and generally when they are least expected. He is still much too young for prediction to be safe, one way or the other.

Another omission occasioned me serious misgivings. It is that of Cyril Scott, on whom I wrote in the same series of articles in 1903. We were then not far from the 'nineties, a period to which both he and I were indebted in various ways. He has the rare distinction of having invented his own musical language, for the seeming Gallicisms with which he is sometimes reproached are present in music that he wrote before the modern French idiom was generally accessible in print. It is a brilliant means of expression, as fascinating as a rich, exotic brocade. His is certainly a very original talent, not merely because of certain external—and sometimes irritating—mannerisms of rhythm and tonality, but because he takes an original and personal view of the whole art of music. On the face of it he should be included in any representative gallery of English musical portraits. Yet it was difficult to include him in this series of articles, for he must be approached from a totally different angle. There were other obstacles too, but of minor importance. He is commonly regarded as modern, but I cannot completely dispel an impression that there clings to him the atmosphere of those literary 'nineties, and, in a curious way, there is scarcely a period more remote from the present than that of Beardsley and the Yellow Book. Then there is his intense preoccupation with pattern, his naïve delight in the invention of ingenious and fascinating devices which he then scatters over a score in such profusion that one is often blinded to the more serious content of the music. Finally circumstances have tempted him to write a considerable number of small works, many of which have only his personal idiom to distinguish them from the songs and pianoforte pieces that provide inferior composers with a living. Worst of all, owing to the shortcomings of the publishing trade, it is mostly these that are available in print, whereas the really valuable works remain in manuscript. This makes it difficult to liberate one's impressions of his chamber music, for instance, which is heard but seldom, from those of his many trivialities, with which every one is familiar. His recent Pianoforte Quintet, String Quintet, and Pianoforte Trio are a warning against a judgment formed rashly upon superficial data. He has certainly a greater importance than is generally given him in our programmes, but he has curiously pronounced limitations, notably in his musical vocabulary, which distort one's vision of him, and the resulting opinion is apt to fluctuate according to which of these many impressions is in the foreground. He is, in short, a far more controversial subject than any of those included in the series, and it was chiefly that consideration

which led me to postpone discussion of his works until some future occasion.

For the rest, the material is far from exhausted, but what remains requires a different method. It is a feature of the times, not merely in England, that composers constantly arise whose best work is contained in one or two scores. They are the musical equivalent of the men of one book. Then there is the vexed question of 'mass production.' It is a fallacy to assume that only the best music deserves a hearing. A library limited to the best books would be a less effective solace than the strange assortment that most 'book' men accumulate around them. It is not by a prescribed course of masterpieces that public taste is fashioned. On the contrary, it is the confident reliance upon the approval of others that has caused musical taste to be so inelastic. The musical public should learn to make its own selection, and it cannot do that unless there is plenty to select from. An expurgated repertoire is suited only to the mentally indolent. Active minds require constant occupation, and in the present state of English music they get it. Among those composers of undefined rank there are many whose talent is at all events sufficient to keep one on the *qui vive* for its fruition, and their number is such that these articles might have been continued for another year or two.

A weakening feature of this remarkable activity is the continued parochial tendency to form groups of indeterminate mutual admiration. Such associations are inevitable everywhere, but the *petites chapelles* of Parisian music are as sharply defined as the alphabetical groups of London painting. Each of them has some kind of a creed which it puts into practice, and is ready to defend. Our corresponding cliques are much less certain of what it is that holds them together, and only too often it turns out to be a touching belief that all their geese are swans. This produces an enervating atmosphere which has sapped the vigour of many promising talents. In recent years there has been a re-grouping from which a new party has arisen in the musical state. It claims to be 'advanced,' yet much of its modernity is akin to the socialism professed by undergraduates. But it is active and scholarly, and much good may come of it, though probably even better results could be attained without such grouping. In other walks of life individualism is our natural instinct. Why not in music? However, these questions of musical politics do not concern a critic until they are thrust upon his notice. Then his best remedy is in flight.

Hearty congratulations to Sir Hugh Allen. It seems to be taken for granted that the headship of the R.C.M. carries with it a knighthood. This is to honour the post rather than the man. We like to think that in the case of Sir Hugh the distinction is bestowed chiefly as a reward for years of strenuous and successful work elsewhere.

THE SYMPHONIC WORKS OF W. H. BELL

BY M. VAN SOMEREN-GODFERY

(Concluded from June number, page 376)

The third Symphony is in F, and bears the date May, 1918-19. There are four separate movements, and the orchestra is slightly larger in spite of the work being generally lighter—celeste, glockenspiel, bass drum, and side-drum being added.

No programme is hinted at, but in contrast to the last Symphony the present one more readily calls up more or less definite ideas in each movement. The introduction to the first movement is full of suggestiveness of waking life. The main themes of the first movement proper are essentially reminiscent of the dance, but their development leads to the assumption that the composer would rather have them considered in the abstract. The whole is full of the spirit of youth and optimism. The second movement is a real *Scherzo*, losing nothing by its brevity. It is most delicately dainty and whimsical, and might well be in illustration of 'R. F.'s' fairy poems in *Punch*. The little chuckle with which it ends is really irresistible. The slow movement is entitled 'Elegy,' and is in parts the most heavily scored in the work. The critics found it sombre and mournful, and suggested that the composer was moved to pen it by the calamitous times Cape Town passed through in October-November, 1918. In those few weeks there were over seven thousand deaths from pneumonic influenza in the Cape Peninsula. This terrible pestilence found Cape Town utterly unprepared, and although little has been said about the matter, words quite fail to express the horrors that arose. The composer was one of the most indefatigable workers and organizers of relief amongst the poorer population in the neighbourhood of his home. This throws a certain light on his personality which may well be reflected in his music. Nevertheless the writer prefers to look on the 'Elegy' as a tribute to those fallen in the war, and set in a vein of pride which has overcome grief, rather than in one of gloom. The solemn writing for the brass recalls the nobility of the Beethoven 'Equali' for trombones, and the whole movement is full of a sincerity which places it in the category of the finest funeral music. Here at any rate is British music worthy of a solemn, great occasion.

In the strenuous last movement the composer's friends can scarcely fail to see the reflection of the out-door life which he has the good fortune to lead when away from his strenuous duties. Living in an ideal country and climate for the purpose, he and his family spend most of their leisure time on horseback. The *Finale*, although largely in the minor, is exhilarating in the extreme.

The first movement—*Andante tranquillo* 3-4, in F—is ushered in by a series of small *motifs*