A Note on the Serpent

Author(s): Harvey Grace

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 57, No. 885 (Nov. 1, 1916), pp. 500-501

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/908449>

Accessed: 15-12-2015 16:11 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

pianoforte, the programme of which will be found in our organ recital column. At four of the subsequent monthly recitals the organ will provide the orchestral part of a Pianoforte Concerto, and on three occasions choral works will be given. Here is the list of works, with the soloists :

- November 5.—First Movement of Pianoforte Concerto in F minor *Glazounov*
(Miss Irene Truman.)
November 19.—Requiem *Brahms*
(The Albert Hall Choir.)
December 3.—Pianoforte Concerto in G minor *Mendelssohn*
(Miss Helen Guest.)
January 7.—Pianoforte Concerto in D minor *Rubinstein*
(Miss Alice Hogg.)
February 4.—Pianoforte Concerto in A minor... .. *Grieg*
(Miss Una Truman.)
March 4.—Fugue, Canzona, and Epilogue for organ, violin solo, and four-part female chorus *Karg-Elert*
(Violin—Mr. Fred Mountney.)
April 1.—Cantata, 'Ecce Homo !'... .. *Bernard Johnson*
(The Albert Hall Choir.)

From February 5 to 9 a series of chamber-music concerts is being arranged, the programmes of which will be announced later.

What measure of support is given to such an excellent scheme as this? A local correspondent kindly furnishes us with the following particulars :

'There is an audience of some 2,000, mostly working men and women. One work at each concert is analysed by Mr. Johnson, illustrations being played on the pianoforte. This feature is much appreciated. The people are good listeners, and show real discrimination both in the matter of music and performance. The chamber music week last year was greatly enjoyed at 6d. a head all over the hall : carpets and easy chairs on ground floor, smoking in gallery ; no vocalist all the week,—simply string quartets, pianoforte trios, quartets, &c., Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, and no sort of "jam" to help it down. The hall was well-filled every night, and £84 handed to local players. The choir is a mission organization, the material being naturally somewhat rough, but they are able to give a good account of themselves in such works as the Brahms "Requiem," Dvorák's "Stabat Mater," &c. Admission to the recitals is free, with a silver collection in the background.'

Comment on such excellent educational work is superfluous. We wish the recitals the success they deserve, and hope that Mr. Johnson's example may be followed in other provincial centres.

A NOTE ON THE SERPENT.

By HARVEY GRACE.

'There's worse things than serpents,' said Mr. Penny. 'Old things pass away,' 'tis true ; but the serpent was a good old note,—a deep, rich note was the serpent.'

'UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE.'

Hearing that a specimen of that obsolete instrument, the serpent, had been unearthed in Devonshire, and was on view at the offices of the Homeland Association, Maiden Lane, Strand, I went to see it. On taking up a wind instrument, one's first impulse is to emit a blast, which I promptly did. I am bound to confess that the result did not tally with Mr. Penny's description. The note produced—there was but one, for the keys and vents refused to back me up—was deep, certainly, but not rich. It was hollow and desolate—cow-like, in fact, recalling the song of

that animal heard across a foggy meadow. On the whole, it was best to take the musical possibilities of the instrument for granted, and learn something of its history. Mr. Prescott Row (editor of the well-known 'Homeland Handbooks') told me he came across the serpent in a dealer's shop at Totnes, where it had long reposed under a coating of dust. The then owner had purchased it at a sale of household goods. Inquiries set on foot through a country newspaper soon established the fact that it had been used in Ashburton Church eighty years ago by one Thomas Bastow.

It bears the maker's name :

D'ALMAINE,
20, Soho Square.

There are six vents and five keys, and one section has been tightly bandaged with black t-pe.

We give a reproduction of an excellent photograph of this old relic. It should be noted that the mouthpiece has been twisted in the wrong direction. In playing, 'the bell-end is turned away from the player, and the mouthpiece makes a right-angle backward turn to reach the lips.' (Grove.)

'Old things pass away,' as Mr. Penny said, and the serpent, once such a power in the west galleries of our country churches, has had its day so far as England is concerned. It still plays its part on the Continent, the *Serpent d'Eglise* being an important factor in some French churches, where its function from its earliest days—about three centuries ago—seems to have been the delivery of the plain-chant. It would appear to be well-adapted for leading the singing of a crowd, for Mersenne tells us that 'even when played by a boy, it is sufficient to support the voices of twenty robust monks.'

Probably in Mersenne's day (1588-1648) the instrument was coarser and more powerful than it was later. In any case, only a very brief trial is needed to make us realise that the boy, like the monks, must have been of a robust habit.

The use to which the serpent has been generally put leads one to suppose that it was necessarily a noisy instrument. Uneven in scale it must have been, from its structure ; difficult to play, because so much depended upon strong and skilful lip-work ; but as it was usually made of thin wood, covered with leather, it could hardly have been very blatant. Well played, its tone was probably more like that of organ flue-work than anything else. In spite of its unwieldy form, it had unexpected technical possibilities ; and we are told of a Yorkshire player named Hurworth, a member of George the Third's private band, under whose hands it delivered elaborate flute variations with neatness and despatch.

In one respect the fingering of the serpent is unique. The left hand is used for the three holes near the mouthpiece, and the right for those near the bell. A glance at the illustration will show that when the instrument is in position, the former section of the tube is descending, and the latter ascending, so that the scale goes down in the left hand and up in the right. In other words, instead of the two sets of three fingers, in a descending passage, running 1 2 3, 1 2 3, they go 1 2 3 2 1.

The classical associations of the serpent are few. Mendelssohn wrote for it in his 'Calm sea' Overture, and in 'St. Paul' ; also it has a part in 'The Siege of Corinth,' 'Masaniello,' and 'Rienzi.' But even these scanty honours were short-lived, and it was soon ousted by the

ophicleide,—which had an even shorter innings, and deserved it, if Mendelssohn's description of it as a 'chromatic bullock' is anywhere near the mark.

To an organist, the serpent has an interest not merely antiquarian. We see in this primitive affair, with its clumsy form and speculative scale, a part of the musical force superseded by him and his instrument. He may profitably ask himself if the change has been entirely for good.

We are too apt to regard the old church bands as crude, noisy, and inefficient. But when we remember their limited repertory and its extreme simplicity, we may fairly conclude that in most cases the level of performance was more than merely passable. My own eyes were opened to the possibilities of such a band when for some six winters I held almost weekly practices with one. It did not play in the church, but was a genuine descendant of the kind of band that did so formerly. Although its members were mainly self-taught, and ear rather than eye was depended on, they had a surprisingly good mastery of their instruments, combined with a keenness and enthusiasm that are more to be desired than much fine technique. We mustered some half-dozen strings, a flute, piccolo, and cornet. I often felt, when accompanying them at some village dance or concert, that it was a pity modern convention should have forbidden their joining me at the organ in some of the Songs of Zion for a change. Since that time the use of orchestral instruments in church has become fairly common, and it seems likely that the church band may be revived. With our elementary schools turning out thousands of young violinists, such revival ought to be easier now than ever it was. Moreover, a few strings should have an excellent effect on congregational singing. Their 'bite' would go far to make up for the lack of accent which is the organ's worst fault. Besides, there must be some folk in every congregation who can play, but not sing. Why not cast our church music net wide enough to include them?

If the old worthies in the delightful novel of Thomas Hardy quoted above were right, the beginning of the end of the village bands came about through the rash introduction of wind instruments. Let us take a glimpse at these Mellstock players: they are on a carol-singing round, discussing as they go the altered taste in church music:

'Times have changed from the times they used to be,' said Mail; 'people don't care much about us now! I've been thinking we must be almost the last left in the county of the old string players. Barrel organs, and they next door to 'em that you blow wi' your foot, have come in terribly of late years.'

'More's the pity,' replied another. 'Time was,—long and merry ago now!—when not one of the varmint was to be heard of; but it served some of the choirs right. They should have stuck to strings as we did, and kept out clar'nets and done away wi' serpents. If you'd thrive in musical religion, stick to strings, says I.'

'I can well bring back to my mind,' said Mr. Penny, 'what I said to poor Joseph Ryme (who took the tribble part in High Story Church for two-and-forty years) when they thought of having clar'nets there. "Joseph," I said, says I, "depend upon't if so be you have them tootling clar'nets you'll spoil the whole set-out. Clar'nets were not made for the service of Providence; you can see it by looking at 'em," I said. And what came o't? Why, my dear souls, the parson set up a barrel-organ on his own account within two years o' the time I spoke, and the old choir went to nothing.'

'Robert Penny, you were in the right,' broke in the eldest Dewy, 'they should ha' stuck to strings. Your brass man is brass—well and good; your reed man is reed—well and good; your percussion is percussion—good again. But I don't care who hears me say it, nothing will speak to your heart with the sweetness of the man of strings.'

'Strings for ever!' said little Jimmy. 'Strings alone would have held their own against all the newcomers in creation. But clar'nets was death, and harmoniums and barrel-organs be miserable machines for such a divine thing as music.'

Little did these enthusiasts guess that one of the miserable machines—a harmonium—was even then on its way to Mellstock! A deputation to the parson was of no avail, and in due course the old band and choir was heard no more. One last favour they begged. Said the spokesman:

'All we thought was that for us ancient singers to be finished off quietly at no time in particular, as now, in the Sundays after Easter, would seem rather mean in the eyes of other parishes, Sir. But if we fell glorious with a bit of a flourish at Christmas we shall have a respectable end, and not dwindle away at some second-Sunday-after or Sunday-next-before-something, that's got no name of his own.'

So at the following Michaelmas they 'fell glorious,' and became critical listeners instead of performers. Will their descendants ever show the like enthusiasm? Have our village organs and organists, in the main, given us much better results? During some recent wanderings in country districts I took the opportunity of attending as many village churches as possible. I may have struck a bad patch, but my experiences on the whole (even after allowing for present difficulties) were depressing. Finding, as I generally did, a choir of raucous boys, an apathetic and almost dumb congregation, with a lifeless accompaniment from a harmonium or small organ, I was able to subscribe heartily to Mr. Penny's opinion that 'there's worse things than serpents.'

[As we go to press we hear that the Ashburton Serpent has been acquired by the Exeter Museum, and will be properly preserved in the county.—ED., *M.T.*]

Mr. Kenneth G. Burns gave the 'MULTUM IN PARVO' ORGANS. All Saints', Elland, on September 2, his programme including the Fugue from the Reubke Sonata, and the Grail music from 'Parsifal.' The organ was built by Messrs. Lewis & Co., of Brixton, on a system invented by Mr. Burns in 1910. 'The design,' we read in the specification, 'has a sixfold aim: economy of space; saving of cost; avoidance of crowding of pipes; flexible tone-blending; volume without din; distinctive character.' We append the specification of the Elland organ, and also of one erected a few years ago at St. Matthias', Richmond, Surrey, on the same system. The Elland organ contains only 14 ranks of pipes, and that at Richmond 22.

ALL SAINTS', ELLAND.

PEDAL.

	Ft.		Ft.
1. Gedacht	10 $\frac{3}{4}$ and 32	5. Flute	8
2. Gedacht	16	6. Octave	8
3. Open wood	16	7. Trombone	16
4. Open metal	16		

MANUAL I.

	Ft.		Ft.
8. Dulciana	8	12. Viola	4
9. Unda Maris, Tenor C ..	8	13. Flute	4
10. Viole d'Orchestre ..	8	14. Tromba	8
11. Gedacht	8	15. Tremulant	8

MANUAL II.

	Ft.		Ft.
16. Open metal	16	20. Gedacht	8
17. Gedacht	16	21. Flute	4
18. Open metal	8	22. Celesta (percussion: five octaves) ..	4
19. Flute	8		

MANUAL III.

	Ft.		Ft.
23. Open metal	8	28. Double Trumpet ..	16
24. Gamba	8	29. Trumpet	8
25. Celeste, Tenor C ..	8	30. Oboe alto	8
26. Gedacht	3	31. Clarion	4
27. Octave	4	32. Tremulant	4

TWELVE COUPLERS.

ACCESSORIES.

17 Pistons, thumb and toe. 2 Balanced Swell Pedals. Manual Compass, 61 Notes. Pedal Compass, 32 Notes.