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ORGAN POSTS IN CANADA: AN UNPROFESSIONAL OPINION.

BY WILLIAM Q. PHILLIPS.

'Look after him a bit, will you?' asked my partner, who was himself going away for a month, 'they are awfully decent people, and were very civil to me when I was in London.' With this he threw over a letter stating that 'Our Mr. Algernon Ramsden is sailing for Canada, per s.s. *Victorian*, and expects to have the pleasure of calling on you about the 25th inst.' So when in due course his card came in I put aside other work and gave him immediate attention. Turncliffe & Ramsden, I knew, had been a firm for at least four generations, and enjoyed an extensive foreign and domestic trade; probably they were opulent—certainly much respected and influential. This was the first time I remembered their sending a man to Canada; but I had noticed that they no longer committed the atrocity of addressing letters to 'Canada, U.S.A.,' which is not only inaccurate but undiplomatic. Canadians do not like the suggestion that they belong to the United States of America.

But to return to Mr. Algernon Ramsden: one could see the effect of a century of family comfort in the well-knit, well-groomed young fellow of easy manners, who probably regarded business chiefly as a good thing to provide an income, and give one a chance to exercise a little authority; always remembering that there are other things in life,—which is a sane and wholesome doctrine for those who can afford it. Knowing my man, or rather his class, I encouraged him to talk about his trip.

Montreal had been kind to him, he said, especially after it was discovered he spoke French. The trip up the Gulf—the junction of ocean and inland navigation—the number and size of the churches—all these he mentioned without in any way lugging them into the conversation; and it seemed quite the thing that he should speak of the excellent placing of the fine organ in Notre Dame, and the impressive effect of a Bach fugue as heard from the ground floor. If a Yankee 'drummer' had talked to me like this I should have thought him daft. Eventually, of course, Ramsden got me to promise to look over his new samples, and when business had been concluded preferred a small request. A relation in England, who was an organist, proposed to come to Canada. Toronto had been mentioned as a likely centre to afford him professional employment; what did I think, or could I put him in the way of reliable information?

'Not in my line,' I said, 'I have just a nodding acquaintance with our organist—think he is an Englishman who has done very well here. But perhaps I can put you in the way. Anything to do to-night?'

Accordingly, in the evening I took him for a run in my car, and just before the long, warm twilight faded, stopped at the tasteful bungalow of my friend, Billy Barron, amateur of church music and several other things, in time to discover Billy himself busy drenching his flower-beds and lawn with our highly-nutritious city water. He hailed me cheerfully, and upon my presenting Ramsden, dexterously shook hands without in any way interrupting his labours. He would have acted in exactly the same way if I had been presenting him to King George V.—at least I think so! But it appeared that he and Ramsden were well met, for they were soon deep in the discussion of a new variety of cannas and the best way of growing sweet peas. When darkness put a stop to the feeble imitation of J. Pluvius there was an adjournment to the verandah for a smoke, Ramsden producing a typical bull-dog pipe, which he preferred to a cigar, and lighting up with great satisfaction. Then he unfolded his subject.

'An English organist,' repeated Billy doubtfully, 'well now, can he play? That is—oh, you know what I mean—is he a first-class performer and good with a choir?'

'Yes,' replied Ramsden, 'decidedly a good executant, and quite successful with a choir. Of course, I am giving you my own opinion.'

'Yes, of course,' said Billy, shifting uneasily in his seat, 'but it's a serious thing to advise a man to break up his connections and come to a new country. How old is he?'

'Under thirty, I should say; single—at present.'

Billy nodded encouragingly. 'That's good,' he said, 'and I'll tell you why. Canada is a big country, that runs into long distances, as you know. A young man coming here to look for a berth as organist might have to do a lot of travelling

to get a good opening. He would need to be foot-free and without encumbrance. Also, some private means, at least enough for a few months, unless he would engage in other employment while looking around.'

'Yes, I see,' replied Ramsden, 'and now can you give me any idea of what he might expect—under favourable circumstances?'

'Why, it all depends on the man himself. For instance, is he used to a good mixed choir? Some of our best appointments are with the Methodists and Presbyterians, who have mixed choirs as a matter of course. Very good choirs, too, composed of well-educated people, who must be treated with tact and civility. They would be quick to discover a duffer, but to a capable man—one whose musicianship was attractive—they would give loyal support. It is not at all the same thing as handling a choir of boys.'

'I can understand that,' said Ramsden, 'but go on.'

Billy wriggled uneasily. What he wanted to say was, 'There is not a bit of use a man coming out here who has been a failure in England or anywhere else,' but this was obviously not the way to put it.

'I suppose he could pass a decent exam.?' he inquired.

'He is an L.R.A.M. and an A.R.C.O.' said Ramsden, smiling, 'and used to conducting a small choral society. His best subjects are the organ and composition. Can blow a horn, on occasion, I believe.'

'Oh, that's all right,' remarked Billy, with evident signs of relief. 'Not that we pay much attention to alphabetical decorations, but they indicate that a man can at least read music, and play a hymn-tune. Do you know, there have been alleged English organists among us who could do neither—properly? On the other hand, reputable graduates, blessed with common-sense, and not too old to be adaptable, get along very well.'

'You'll hardly believe it,' he continued, 'but I have met queer specimens, usually of the Micawber type—not even decent amateurs—but with a fixed idea that anything will do for the Colonies. That is a great mistake so far as music is concerned; our local standards are rather high. I suppose you have heard of the Mendelssohn Choir? Yes? But I was going to say—a few years ago, when I came here from a small town, where I dabbled in choir-work, I was appealed to by the Rev. Hollingsworth to help in an emergency. He had an organist, just out from England (he said) and claiming to have great experience; but he could not get along with the choir at all. Would I take charge for a few weeks?'

'I refused at first, knowing it would be a thankless job, but Hollingsworth was a decent fellow, an old acquaintance, and at last I promised to do what I could, until he could make better arrangements.'

'Just as I expected, I found things generally run down, and all the music we could attempt for the next Sunday was of the simplest. The new organist, Simmons by name, was a rough-looking individual, with the hands and manners of a labourer. His playing of the vestry harmonium was slipshod, but you can't judge by that sort of thing.'

'On the Sunday I discovered that the church organ was horribly out of tune, and at first supposed that Simmons's peculiar style of playing was intended to make the best of things. In giving out a tune or chant he produced an inarticulate wail, beginning and ending with the swell closed, and with a humped-up *crescendo* in the middle. With the music before one it was possible to identify the sound with the notes—in spots—but as an intimation of what was to be sung, to those who did not know, it was vague—very vague! So were all the accompaniments; time and tune were uncertain, there were amazing experiments with the stops, and the result was a queer discordant background which the singers wisely ignored. Not content with the score, our organist embellished as many chords as possible with sevenths and ninths, not taking the slightest trouble to resolve them. His pedalling was of the hit and miss variety, and altogether *ad libitum*.

'Needless to say I didn't like his playing at all, but it was not for a week or two that I made up my mind to the simple explanation that Simmons was grossly incompetent. His voluntaries were nearly all improvised, that is, the most aimless, dreary vamping you can imagine. His fingers simply "wandered idly over the noisy keys"—the swell pumping so persistently that he might have hitched it to the bellows!

'I took occasion to look over a few sheets of music he had brought to church, and found scraps from elementary works for the piano—the sort of thing that a ten-year-old girl might play—and about half a dozen of the shortest and easiest pieces by Batiste. This was the only organ music I ever heard him attempt. On one occasion, however, he asked for a copy of the "Messiah," as he proposed to perform the "Hallelujah Chorus." You never heard such a row! He could play only the easiest parts, and these he mangled over and over again, concluding with a flourish of his own. "Grand, wasn't it?" he asked me afterwards. The absurdity of the whole thing was that he took himself seriously, and was quite huffy because his playing was not appreciated.

'Simmons soon got to be beyond a joke. The members of the choir spoke their minds, and there were complaints from the congregation. He and I did not pull together, because he was jealous of my being there at all, and anyway I queered myself with the fellow by remarking that the church organ was all out of tune, only to be told he had just finished tuning it—quite a versatile genius! It was discovered afterwards that he had done a lot of damage to the pipes, some of which looked as though he had been operating with an axe.

'I told the parson that his English organist was an impostor, whereat the good man was grieved and surprised. "The poor fellow has a wife and family," he said, "and I should be sorry to turn him off; besides, he claims to have had a great deal of experience, and at least knows the service." Simmons was a voluble and plausible talker, when it suited him, and had got on the soft side of the parson, who knew nothing of music, and was otherwise what we call an "easy mark" in this country. I told him that Simmons ought to be at work with a pick and shovel instead of masquerading as an organist. At the best he was an undisciplined, half-baked amateur, who could barely read music. I had discovered that he played mostly by ear, and he probably never had a lesson in his life. But the parson was very loth to act, and after all Simmons saved him the trouble.

'More than once he had come to the church smelling strongly of whisky, and on the last Sunday night when we were favoured with his services he was plainly tipsy. How he pulled through the first part of the service I don't know, but his playing was not much worse than usual. In sermon-time he went fast asleep, and not responding to a gentle shake, I deemed it best to let him alone, and finished the service myself. When the people had gone we roused him up—very nasty and quarrelsome he was, and I was glad that a policeman off duty, a member of the choir, undertook to see him home. That was evidently the beginning of a spree. A day or two afterwards he was arrested in the street, drunk and disorderly, and got thirty days of durance vile. Hollingsworth, the parson, like the good man he was, looked after Simmons's wife and children, and got the fellow a job afterwards, which he soon lost because he would neither work honestly nor keep sober.

'Now I don't suppose, for a moment, that he was in any sense a sample of the *genus* English organist—nothing but an impostor: in fact, who had taken advantage of Hollingsworth's good nature and credulity—the very last type of man we want in Canada in any capacity. But perhaps I must apologise for dragging him into the conversation, for you will be thinking it an insinuation—'

'Oh, not at all,' said Ramsden, laughing. 'No offence meant, I'm sure, and none taken. Rather good story, and I happen to know where I can retail it with good effect when I get back home.'

'Well,' resumed Billy, 'about your friend: if he comes here I can at least introduce him to some members of the profession, and in the summer I might get him an opportunity to supply—to show his mettle. But I won't make any rash promises, and—er—you might intimate to him that we are not exactly savages.'

'Certainly,' said Ramsden.

'And now to answer your question about possible earnings. At St. Luke's, where I attend, which is a typical parish church, we pay six hundred dollars a year—call it £120. Not enough for a man to live on if he is married and keeping house, but our organist has other employment, so that

altogether he makes a good living. At that big Methodist church across the street the organist gets twelve hundred dollars, and makes as much more teaching vocal music, which is his speciality. Besides, he has odds and ends, lecturing at the University for example, for he is a man of culture, an Oxford graduate, and well regarded personally. Of course, he did not build up his connection in a month, or even a year.

'In a country town, where it is often easier for a new-comer to get a start, an organist with the indispensable qualification of choirmaster will get from £50 to £100, English, and make as much more teaching if he is a good teacher, who can prepare his pupils for the local exams. of the University and Conservatories. If not, he will need other employment, which he may accept without any loss of caste. In this country, an organist is not necessarily and *ex officio* a gentleman or a menial, but exactly what he makes himself, socially and professionally.

London Concerts.

ROYAL CHORAL SOCIETY.

A performance of Christmas Carols and Patriotic Music drew a large audience on Saturday afternoon, December 19. No doubt it was difficult to construct a scheme the jangling keynotes of which were severally 'Peace and goodwill to all men' and warlike sentiments. 'The Cradle of Christ,' a Christmas Cantata by Sir Frederick Bridge, was one of the most important and interesting features of the programme. The carols selected included some old favourites, and a new Festival Carol, 'Ring out, wild bells' composed by Percy Fletcher for choir, orchestra, and organ. This new work was a great success. A selection from Sir Hubert Parry's Cantata 'War and Peace,' conducted by the composer, was a great feature of the second part of the programme. Another item that was well received was the chorus 'The comrades' song of hope' (Adolphe Adam), accompaniments to which had been scored effectively by Percy Fletcher. The soloists were Miss Emily Shepherd, Madame Kirkby Lunn, Mr. Alfred Heather, and Mr. Frederick Ranalow, and Mr. H. L. Balfour presided at the organ. Sir Frederick Bridge conducted.

LONDON CHORAL SOCIETY.

This Society is helping bravely to keep music going. On December 9, with the assistance of attractive resources, it gave a popular concert at Queen's Hall for the benefit of Princess Mary's Fund. Miss Carrie Tubb and Miss Gwladys Roberts were the soloists. The National Hymns of the Allies and 'It comes from the misty ages' (the last chorus of Elgar's 'The Banner of St. George') brought out the power of the choir, which as usual was conducted by Mr. Arthur Fagge. Nothing gave more pleasure than the performance of a Fantasia on 'Tipperary,' played by the Coldstream Guards Band under Captain Rogan. The well-known humorous potentialities of the bassoon were admirably exploited.

THE ORIANA MADRIGAL SOCIETY.

The annual concert of Christmas music given by this choir on Tuesday, December 15, at the Westminster Cathedral Hall, was as usual a feast of good things. The conductor is surely a past-master in the art of drawing up programmes of beautiful and unhackneyed items. The music on the occasion under notice was chosen from a wide field. All was English, save Bach's fine cantata 'The Sages of Sheba.' Among the ancients were represented Gibbons, Dering, and Byrde, and the moderns included Von Holst, Norman O'Neill, Rutland Boughton, and Vaughan Williams. Although the choir was smaller than usual, there was no falling short of the high standard of excellence we have come to look for. Mr. C. Kennedy Scott acted as conductor and accompanist. There was a large audience.