

Music at the Oberammergau Passion Play

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difficult life's outward conditions became, the nearer famine and privation approached, the firmer was Medtner's resolution to proceed as if nothing had happened in his Fatherland. Innumerable difficulties lay in his way. He was isolated from the progress of music and art in the world; the very necessity for writing beautiful music seemed doubtful. In the midst of all this gloom he fell dangerously ill on the eve of the first performance of his new Pianoforte Concerto. For months he lingered between life and death—his one thought being the delivery of his last message to the public. But he did not die. Weak and tottering, in a state of feverish excitement he appeared in the concert-hall, an extra concert having been announced especially for him. And he played what is considered his sublimest work. The impression on those present was profound.

Since this article was written, Medtner has left Moscow. He is now living and working at Berlin.

#### MUSIC AT THE OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

The Passion Play of the villagers of Oberammergau in South Bavaria this summer again, after a lapse of twelve years, drew numbers of the devout of many nationalities to that agreeable spot on the fringe of the Alps. Such musical persons as may make this journey appear often to be unprepared for the large part that music takes in the Passion Play; and their surprise at this large part (for the music usually gets but the barest mention in travellers' eloquent tales of the spectacle) is only surpassed by their surprise at the sort of music it is.

The mediæval institution of the Passion Play owes its survival at Oberammergau first to the villagers' tenacious conservatism, and secondly to their judicious tempering of conservatism. In the course of centuries they have just so far modified their cherished institution as to enable it to live on successfully in a changed world. Thus, whereas in olden days the hardy peasant spectators witnessed the Play in the open churchyard, when Messrs. Thomas Cook & Sons started introducing myriads of pilgrims of the comfortable classes from England and New England a weatherproof auditorium was called for, and conservatism yielded to the point of allowing the construction of a roofed theatre wherein four thousand spectators can sit dry, though it rain all day on the players (the stage is open to the sky). But well before the advent of Messrs. Cook the conservative Ammergauers had had unwillingly to relinquish primitive elements of the Play. The pilgrim in 1922 may not count on a single shred of surviving mediævalism; the uncouth, simple-hearted grotesqueness of the sacred plays of the Middle Ages, as we to-day fondly imagine them, has been swept away. Quaint mediævalism lingered late in the mountain Passion Plays until, sometime towards the end of the 18th century, the quaintness was altogether out of tune with the Church authorities, and at one stroke all the Passion Plays were abolished. Tenacious Ammergau retained its Play only at the cost of radical reform. The text had to become unexceptionably evangelical; hence, after the restoration, the text of Weiss (1811). The present text (Daisenberger's) dates from 1860; but neither 1811 nor 1860 unfortunately represents at all a 'good' period in religious art.

Conservatism's rout, during the prohibition period (1770-1811), meant a chance for a wholly new music at the resumption. What the old music was no one to-day appears to conceive at all clearly. The Ammergau choirmaster and organist, amiable Herr Rochus Dedler (1779-1822), composed the new music, and this is, with trifling modifications, what we hear to-day. Whatever the praise that cannot be allowed to Dedler, at least he belonged to the place, and that, in the eyes of Ammergau, is three-fourths of virtue. He is not a Bach, not a Wagner, but that the Passion music should be by an Ammergauer is the main thing. Curious is this truculent exclusiveness, which does even in the 20th century allow the Passion Play to be a thing of that particular mountain valley and of nowhere else. Nothing at Ammergau was quite so touching as the scene of the village fathers fiercely rejecting the blandishments of a firm of American 'movies.' You may be unable to admire without reserve the Play itself, and still be won over to respect thoroughly the pretty little spirited local patriotism which preserves it all, in a vulgar age, from being a mere calculated lure for trippers. This is the excuse for the music. If the Passion Play were 'run' as an attractive international festival a dozen better substitutes could be found for Dedler's early 19th century music. But no doubt Ammergau will cling through thick and thin to this music, which after all harmonizes with a good deal of the other artistic elements of the representation—so German, so early 19th century.

At the Passion Play we see enacted the Entry into Jerusalem, Gethsemane, the Betrayal, the Trial, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension. The sublime story is, in contrast with the conciseness of the evangelists, here spread over eight hours of performance. The large stage beguiles the eye with its background of Bavarian hills, pine strewn, and shifting in colour as the hours pass. The moments of actual drama are comparatively brief. The music holds the field for long stretches. As a prelude to each dramatic scene a chorus (men and women) of forty ceremoniously steps from the wings and ranges itself in a single rank facing the audience. Its duty is to instruct us, by speech and song, in the episode we are about to see, and in particular to draw Old Testament analogies. These analogies are further brought home by *tableaux vivants*, very elaborate and the source of local pride, which are displayed on the inset stage, the musical commentary proceeding the while. The music is for chorus and soli (S.A.T.B.). The principal soloist is the bass, a sort of *χορῳγός*. There is an orchestra of about fifty.

This orchestra gives the unprepared listener his biggest and only musical surprise of the day, with its Overture opening:



From this premise the rest follows naturally—a complete collection of all the little commonplaces of late 18th century musical idiom! Haydn, Gluck, and Mozart were no doubt the composers most respected by the Ammergau organist of a hundred and ten years ago, and he humbly raised his molehill on the pattern of those mountains. His humility is almost disarming, and we do not forget that he was writing for unskilled executants and for

performance in the open air. In the ordinary way it is absurd to ask for any richness of content in open-air music, and if the performance were of, say, some classical subject, not intimately touching, we might feel plenty of toleration for pastoral music so mildly rococo and not offensive. But this Tragedy is not an *Orpheus*, an *Iphigenia*. It is not to be regarded with the detachment that might allow us to find in Dedler's poverty-stricken art a little historical interest, and the gap between the powerfully stirring effect of the stage-spectacle and this humble but persistently long-winded music is a drain on sympathy and patience. Above all the onlooker who is at all musical cannot get Bach out of his head, and indeed to the point of feeling that the best things in the Passion Play—the large sincerity, serenity, and pathos of the stage action—have been a million times more satisfyingly expressed by Bach in terms of music. Once come to know the *St. Matthew* Passion and Oberammergau is no place for you. This poor Dedler dared to attempt much what Bach did in interpolating meditative arias at crucial points of the sublime drama. How exquisitely the tension of pain is thus relieved in Bach's Passion Play no reader here needs telling. At Ammergau the musical platitude of these meditations (comparable to a very old-fashioned type of Three Choirs' Festival oratorio on some Old Testament subject) sets one saying, 'No more Ammergau for me—the Lent Passion Play at St. Paul's or St. Anne's, Soho, is good enough!' The close of it all is the most disconcerting. The infinite tenderness, the sweet, grave relaxation of Bach's chorus 'In tears of grief, dear Lord, we leave Thee,' must surely for all of us be the one conceivable right closing mood. Oberammergau ends on a chirpy little Hallelujah Chorus of the flattest inadequacy.

There was a competent orchestra this year at Oberammergau. The choir sustained all day an unflagging dignity. The tenor soloists were rather trying. There was an extremely fine young bass, Guido Diemer, on whom fell much of the work. C.

## THE NURSERIES OF ENGLISH SONG—II.

BY FRANK KIDSON

By 1745 the fame of the London pleasure-gardens—Vauxhall, Marylebone, and Ranelagh—as musical centres, apart from their places in the fashionable world, had been firmly established. Vocal music became an item in the instrumental programmes, and, as stated in my previous article,\* the best and most popular talent was engaged. This particular talent was quite ready to accept Vauxhall engagements, for there was very little opening for it elsewhere. Concerts, apart from the gardens, were not everyday functions as at present, and the theatre gave rather limited scope for professional guinea-earning.

In this matter we of to-day have to thank those bewigged proprietors of the garden leases for the encouragement they gave to English music. If we eliminate from the published music of the time all that had its first hearing at the public gardens, there would be very little left to show what English music was like in the 18th century.

Vauxhall and Marylebone had erected covered orchestras, supported by pillars at about 10-ft. from the ground, and singers and instrumentalists in all

the finery of the period—lace ruffles, powdered wigs, silk or velvet coats, satin waistcoats and breeches for the male artists, and even gayer attire for the women—did their level best to amuse the crowd that clustered around.

The vocalists could have had no easy task to make their voices heard amid the hubbub of the gardens; the rustle of the trees, the calls for waiters, the gay laughter at the tea-tables, or the hilarity that conceivably accompanied the rack punch for which Vauxhall was famous—all must have militated against the 'light and shade' that is so effective in an ordinary concert-room, and killed anything like delicate singing. At the three principal gardens organs had been erected, and the tinkle of the harpsichord could be heard in the numerous pieces and 'lessons' for that instrument that every composer felt called upon to produce. How 'thin' these sound to-day! But we must realise the limitations of the spinet and harpsichord in regard to sustained tone. On wet days—and a wet day at Vauxhall was not an unknown misery—the music was performed in an elaborate 'rotunda,' as at Ranelagh; but this was a poor substitute for the open-air concert on a fine evening.

In the early days of Vauxhall singing, a popular item was T. A. Arne's pastoral, *Colin and Phæbe*, sung as a dialogue by Mrs. Arne and Thomas Lowe. This can be seen in Arne's *Lyric Harmony*, Book I. In the 'fifties Miss Stevenson, Miss Burchell, and Lowe were the fixed singers. They not only sang the modest ditty telling of the loves and jealousies of impossible pastoral people, but tackled elaborate cantatas, accompanied by heavy instrumentation. The musical director and composer for Vauxhall during this period was Dr. John Worgan, and many of his Vauxhall compositions as performed by the singers named can be seen in his *Agreeable Musical Choice* and like collections.

Thomas Lowe deserted Vauxhall in 1763 to take the lease of Marylebone Gardens, which in a few years brought him to bankruptcy. He then sang at Finch's Grotto Gardens.

Miss Stevenson and Miss Burchell were the chief exponents of the particular type of lyric that was so characteristic of Vauxhall and Marylebone. It sang of the simple love-making of artless and yet artificial maidens and equally artless and artificial swains who were shepherds by occupation. These were eminently 'swains,' because 'swain' rhymes so neatly with 'plain,' and everything occurred on 'plains.' The following example shows the type:

No nymph that trips the verdant plains  
With Sally can compare:  
She wins the hearts of all the swains  
And rivals all the fair.

Another popular type was the 'Scotch' song. This was written by versifiers without the slightest knowledge of the Scots vernacular, and perfectly ignorant of the meaning of any but the most obvious of Scotch words. The composers played up by introducing into every bar a galvanic snap which was then considered the essence of Scots music. The one Vauxhall Scotch song which has survived to our own day is James Hook's *Within a mile of Edinburgh town*. This was founded on an earlier pseudo-Scotch song written by Thomas D'Urfey. Hook's song was sung at Vauxhall in the season of 1780 by Mrs. Wroughton, its printed title when published being *I wonnot buckle too*. In this occurs the line 'Sweet lav'rocks

\* See June number, page 394.