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ROYAL CHORAL SOCIETY :

THE RESIGNATION OF
SIR FREDERICK BRIDGE

BY HERMAN KLEIN

The parting between friends, no matter when it comes, is always fraught with sadness, and long expectation of a melancholy moment does little, as a rule, to alleviate its poignancy. Otherwise one might say that Sir Frederick Bridge displayed his customary thoughtfulness for the feelings of his good friends, the members of the Albert Hall choir, when he made known to them at rehearsal recently his intention of vacating, at the end of the present season, the post which he will then have held for twenty-five years, of conductor of the Royal Choral Society. The event might not in the natural course of things have been unanticipated; but it was peculiarly fitting that the announcement of it—the official intimation, as it were—should come from the lips of the personage most concerned. It was done, too, with that fine simplicity of phrase and unaffected dignity and earnestness of manner that best enable an Englishman to conceal his emotions, but which nevertheless caused the inevitable lump to rise in the throat of many a singer then facing him.

For, truth to tell, they have been on remarkably good terms with each other, these eight hundred and fifty choristers and their genial conductor, ever since the latter succeeded Sir Joseph Barnby in 1896. Barnby was not exactly an easy man to follow, being popular in the widest sense, *facile princeps* in his line, something of a martinet, like Costa, but easier to placate, and therefore liable to be personally adored. Yet, delicate and difficult though his task at the outset, the organist of Westminster Abbey quickly showed that he had the right fibre to conquer with—the warm good-nature and witty tongue; the sufficiency of experience as a choral conductor; the mind of a sympathetic and capable musician; above all, the resolute will to do his best in everything.

And so, conquer he did. The old choristers who would have gone through fire and water for 'Sir Joseph' soon found that confidence in the new leader would not be misplaced, and from that time forward they unhesitatingly transferred their affections and their ready obedience to him who in due course became 'Sir Frederick.' Their successors and fresh companions during the course of five and twenty seasons have taken the cue from

them, and it may be asserted without fear of contradiction that their *esprit de corps* has never been stronger than it will be when Sir Frederick Bridge lays down his baton for the last time at the Good Friday performance of 'The Messiah' in April next. To quote the words written by the secretary of the Society in the programme of the Jubilee Concert :

They are proud of their choir—proud of its fame and traditions . . . to them it is a potent civilising and elevating force destined to bring much gladness and content.

Paying tribute to the conductor, the same writer declared him to be

. . . a veteran in years, but in kindheartedness and vigour the youngest of his generation. This is not the place to sing his praises, nor is it necessary, for his is easily the best-known name among English musicians of the day. As organist of Westminster Abbey for forty-four years (and now retired with the honourable title of Emeritus-Organist), conductor, lecturer, essayist, and by no means least, as humorist, his fame is assured.

A solid and lasting record of his valuable labours at the Royal Albert Hall is to be found in the catalogue of new works performed there under his direction during the second half of the Jubilee period. These comprise mostly compositions from the pens of native composers then or now living. Among them may be noted Elgar's 'King Olaf,' 'Dream of Gerontius,' 'The Apostles,' 'The Kingdom,' 'The Music-Makers,' and 'The Spirit of England'; Coleridge-Taylor's 'Hiawatha,' 'The Blind Girl of Castel Cuillé,' 'The Atonement,' and 'A Tale of Old Japan'; Parry's 'War and Peace,' 'Invocation to Music,' 'Pied Piper of Hamelin,' and 'The Chivalry of the Sea'; Saint-Saëns' 'The Promised Land'; Mackenzie's 'The Witch's Daughter'; Cowen's 'The Veil'; Stanford's 'Stabat Mater,' 'Songs of the Sea,' 'Songs of the Fleet,' and 'At the Abbey Gate'; Ethel Smyth's 'Mass'; Hamilton Harty's 'Mystic Trumpeter'; Vaughan Williams' 'Sea Symphony'; Charles Wood's 'Dirge for Two Veterans'; Balfour Gardiner's 'News from Whydah'; and last, but not least, Sir Frederick's own 'Flag of England,' 'The Ballad of the Clampherdown,' 'The Forging of the Anchor,' 'A Song of the English,' and 'The Inchcape Rock,' not to mention the earlier (and perhaps best of them all) 'Callirhoe' and the setting of 'Rock of Ages.'

Here, assuredly, is a list of which any conductor may be proud. However, the whole career of this remarkable man has been a synonym for hard work. His interesting and amusing autobiography, 'A Westminster Pilgrim,' affords eloquent proof of this. (Truly, he reminds us more than any other man of Sir Charles Hallé, who, if he neither lectured nor wrote essays, was capable of musical strain for longer stretches of time than any of his contemporaries, and did not, moreover, indulge in a long annual holiday with plenty of salmon-fishing

during the summer months.) An appendix to the book gives a complete list of the works performed by the Royal Choral Society under the author's direction from 1896 to 1918. Referring to this, Sir Frederick also says, 'My relations with both choir and orchestra have always been very happy; now and then I have been betrayed into a satirical word, but seldom into an angry one.' He probably regards as his most creditable achievement at the Albert Hall the revival of 'The Messiah,' without Mozart's additional accompaniments. 'I had always looked askance at these embellishments,' he says, and 'to my mind the gain in dispensing with these accompaniments is immense.' On the whole, the public verdict has endorsed his opinion.

When the time comes for complete retirement Sir Frederick Bridge will, in the fullest degree, have earned his *otium cum dignitate*. Nevertheless, as all the world knows, he is still marvellously young for the seventy-seven years he will have lived by the fifth of next December. Writing about him in a prominent daily paper at the time of our present King's Coronation, I made allusion to this characteristic juvenility, which has not been affected by what I ventured to describe then as 'one of the liveliest, most excitable temperaments to be found in a profession of notoriously excitable beings.' I added,

He is by nature eminently practical. He is an artist, but not a dreamer; a level-headed business man, ever ready to soar to music's sublimest heights in search of inspiration for an anthem or a cantata; just as content to delve amid forgotten scores and dusty volumes for material for a Gresham lecture.

Those words are just as true of him to-day, and there is no reason why, in spite (or rather because) of the cessation of his work as conductor of the Royal Choral Society, they should not be equally applicable to him ten years hence.

A further resignation to be recorded is that of Mr. Augustus Littleton, chairman of Novello & Co., Ltd., from the Committee of Management of the Royal Choral Society. His resignation brings to an end a close and, it may surely be said, a mutually beneficial association between the Royal Choral Society and the house of Novello which has continued without a break for the last thirty-two years. The real commencement of this friendly association may be traced as far back as 1873, and in 1889 it was placed on a firm and substantial basis by an agreement which was entered into between the Society and the late Alfred Henry Littleton, senior partner in Messrs. Novello & Co., and Mr. Littleton was invited to join the Committee of Management. It was in a sense a veritable union of *corps et de biens*, and as a natural consequence of the scheme Messrs. Novello abandoned the successful series of Oratorio

Concerts which for some time they had been carrying on at St. James's Hall. It was agreed that Mr. Littleton should be empowered to nominate from time to time works selected from the Novello catalogue to be presented by the Society, and amongst other valuable considerations a substantial sum was to be granted by the publishing firm towards the cost of presenting these works at the Society's concerts. It resulted from the exercise of this power that in March, 1900, Coleridge-Taylor's 'The Song of Hiawatha' was produced by the Society on payment of a hundred pounds by the publishers.

This agreement lapsed theoretically in 1892, but in practice it was continued for some years afterwards. In the meanwhile, Alfred Henry Littleton never ceased to serve—faithfully and assiduously, as was his wont—on the Committee of Management until his death in 1914. After a short interval, Mr. Augustus Littleton was invited to take his brother's place on the Committee, and also on the sub-committee (appointed annually) whose duties were—and are—to arrange the programmes, engage the soloists, and attend to all details connected with the Society's concerts. The suggestions and recommendations of this sub-committee for each season are naturally submitted to the Committee of Management for approval and confirmation, and it need scarcely be said that the services of Mr. Augustus Littleton were rendered throughout with the same zeal and regard for the mutual interests at stake as had marked his late brother's tenure of office.

The signing of the contract between the Society and Messrs. Novello excited the highest expectations regarding the advantages that would accrue therefrom, and it will be of interest to quote in this connection some lines which appeared in the *Musical Times* of October, 1889, over the then familiar initials 'J. B.' (Joseph Bennett). They headed an article dealing with the four seasons' splendid work (1885-89) accomplished under Sir (then Dr.) Alexander Mackenzie at 'Novello's Oratorio Concerts, and ran as follows:

After working through four seasons, these Concerts have ceased to exist. Yet, after all, that is scarcely the way to put it. We shall know them no more as a separate entity, so much is indubitable; but they will still live, in their spirit and in the influence of their director, as part and parcel of the kindred enterprise at the Albert Hall. The bare facts are these: Mr. Alfred Littleton, head of the firm of Novello, Ewer & Co., has joined the Committee of the Royal Choral Society; discontinuing the Concerts hitherto given in St. James's Hall by his firm, and transferring his interest to the older body, which will produce a certain number of new works that would otherwise have been brought out by the Novello Choir. This is not extinction; it is a marriage, and a marriage may be prolific.

Unquestionably it was prolific—alike in achievement and in healthy influence on the advancement of the choral art of our epoch.