Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Orpheus Chez Nous

Author(s): Harvey Grace

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 57, No. 876 (Feb. 1, 1916), pp. 84-85

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/910854>

Accessed: 24-10-2015 19:05 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>

ORPHEUS CHEZ NOUS.

BY HARVEY GRACE.

Before leaving the house I had been thinking about the revival of domestic amusements, and especially home music, brought about by the dark streets. The subject was still in my mind when I ran against him—literally—in Acacia Road, where he had paused before a garden gate on which was inscribed in gilt capitals the cosy legend 'Chez Nous.' I saw nothing odd in the fact that there was no shock at our impinging. Nor did it seem strange that though the night was cold, with a drizzling rain, he was clad only in a loose linen garment and was bareheaded. That there should depend from his shoulders a musical instrument—picturesque, but apparently of very limited possibilities—was also to be expected.

I began by asking him one of the three inevitable questions of to-day: 'How is the war affecting you?' 'Haven't been so busy for æons,' he replied. 'But surely,' I said, 'that's odd. There are so few concerts compared with pre-war days—'

He broke in: 'Public concerts, yes! But music-makings, no! A neglected Elizabethan poet has described my job in lines familiar to you all, though not many of you could say off-hand in which of his works they occur:

"Orpheus with his lute —"

though I may point out, by the way, that my instrument' (here he lightly ran a hand across the strings, and there trembled away into the suburban silence a few fifths—consecutive, I noted with pain), 'my instrument is not a lute, but a lyre. But in your Shakespeare's days the lute was *the* instrument, so with that disregard of the verities allowable only in a genius, he wrote it down a lute.'

'Bacon would have made no mistake,' I murmured.

'No,' he replied: 'also he would have made no exquisite poetry. He would have found it as difficult to write these lines as to refuse a bribe:

To his music plants and flowers
Ever sprung: As sun and showers
There had made a lasting spring.

'Aren't they delicious? One might almost write them on a scrap of paper and wear them as a buttonhole, they are so fragrant and fresh. The song ends, you remember, by pointing out that

In sweet music is such art
Killing care and grief of heart
Fall asleep, or hearing, die.

I will not stay to dwell on the fact that some of your composers and singers have made havoc of the grammar by regarding the word "killing" as a verb instead of an adjective, but pass on to point out that there never was so much killing care and grief of heart as now, and, therefore, never so much need for the healing side of sweet music.'

'Concerts—'

'Concerts! whoever went to King's Hall with "grief of heart," and found it die? How much "killing care" has "fallen asleep" at the Ionian Hall? When folk have a pain in their body, they send for the doctor. When the pain is in their mind or conscience (if it is a very bad one, and especially if it is combined with physical twinges), they call in the parson, or have recourse to one of your more fashionable forms of witchcraft. But do you ever find them sending for a musician to give them tonal soothing syrup? There are few recorded cases since Saul sent for a young man who was a cunning player upon an harp, and even he, the cure effected, threw things at the artist. Concerts have their uses in setting a standard for the amateur to aim

at (or avoid), and are economically important, since even professional musicians must live, but the best music from a curative point of view is that which people make for themselves. It is not the hearing, so much as the actual making, that cures the "hump." You have of late years become too much a nation of listeners. Hundreds of thousands more of you than now do so, might easily become sufficiently good performers to do yourselves a great deal of mental and physical good. Sit at the feet of the skilled professional, by all means, but make your own music as well, though not in public. However, I think matters are on the mend. One of the things that you English will have to bless the war for, is the discovery of your own homes. There has not been so much reading or music of an evening under your roof-trees for generations.'

'But a lot of the music is mechanical,' I said:

'Surely you don't approve of the pianola?'

'The pianola shall have my benison because it is an improvement on the individual in all but a very few cases. The human more often than not has one short-coming that is simply fatal to his performance of anything but the simplest music,—he is hard-up technically. The pianola's deficiencies do not lie that way, and the other drawbacks are rapidly becoming less.'

'The gramophone'—

He smote the strings of his lyre impatiently,—

That little quotation from Beethoven, brought up to date by triplanal harmony, expresses my feelings about the gramophone! The contrivance does everything rather worse than the human, accompanied by a whirring, scratching sound,—for which, it is true, there is no extra charge. Everything that goes into its metallic maw suffers a sea-change into something strange, but not rich. A good voice goes in clear and reappears of the tin, tinny. An orchestral performance is interned balanced, and comes out with insignificant details unexpectedly taking the place of the whole,—the flute drowning the tuba, or a few notes of the oboe hitting you in the eye like a blast of Doom. I once heard a gramophone disgorge a performance of "Adeste Fideles" by a cathedral choir. At the other end of the instrument I know the choir to be one of outstanding excellence. As they reached my pained ears on this occasion they were an ill-balanced rabble, apparently in the early stages of asthma. I smile on the pianola, but when the gramophone comes in at the door Orpheus flies out at the window.'

'Have you any suggestions to make as to the kind of music for home consumption?' I asked.

'Lots,' he replied, 'but I won't stop to make many, since time presses; and, moreover, it would be a mere casting of pearls. If I thought any of you English amateurs would listen, I should lay stress on the treasures of native music which are rarely drawn on in the home. You have a wealth of glees, part-songs, and madrigals second to that of no other country. It is thoroughly national: indeed, it would be possible to write a tolerable history of the social progress of England from materials contained in your part-music, from "Sumer is icumen in" down to the latest eccentricity of'—(here he named a well-known composer of to-day—or to-morrow). 'But the performance of it is generally left to large societies.

Yet this vast store contains hundreds of pieces of delightful music which are exactly the thing for the domestic circle. But what do we find? He waved a hand towards 'Chatsworth,' a house three doors off. 'In that house there are five tolerable voices,—a very fair quartet, with paterfamilias able to provide an extra bass if required. None of the five people are fitted, either vocally or temperamentally, for solo performances. With practice they would be able to give capital performances of part-songs, and would in the process learn something about reading, rhythm, time, and other things about which at present they know little. This being the case, of course, they all essay songs which they fondly imagine suit them. Papa, for example, priding himself on some half-dozen low notes of uncertain intonation and of a hollow and desolating timbre, elects to appear vocally in the rôle of a brigand, or gipsy, or some other of the less reputable professions, forsaking these shady paths only to adventure himself on the rolling main. In the last line of songs dealing with these marine excursions he is, of course, provided with an opportunity of plumb the vocal depths, which he does with draughty gusto. He is small of stature, with an incomplete and involuntary tonsure, and his chest has long since left its original moorings and come to anchor lower down. Item, he has two, and in his more comfortable moments, three chins. Altogether, anybody less like an outlaw bold, a gipsy free, or a jovial tar (*with his yo-ho!*) you cannot easily imagine. I need not dwell on the exploits of his son Harold, who sings passionate love-lyrics, and who has so little control over his voice that in the more fervid passages he unconsciously transposes his part a semitone higher. When remonstrated with, he claims that expression is more important than pitch or time, and says that anyway, sharp singing is better than flat, clinching the matter by quoting one or two well-known public performers who are not slavish in the matter.

'I pass over, too, his sister Myrtle, who having great admiration for a saucy comedienne famous in musical comedy, regularly buys and sings the songs made famous by her idol. But Myrtle is neither saucy, nor a comedienne, and the points made at the theatre by Miss Ruby Delamere never reach "Chatsworth."

'If you suggested to our friends that instead of spending one shilling and fourpence many times over on songs which none of them can sing, they should buy part-music which they *can*, for a penny or twopence a copy, they would feel hurt. There are many thousands of "Chatsworths" in England, and the one kind of vocal music they know least about is the kind in which their countrymen have always excelled.

'Think, too, of the jolly folk-songs of these islands of yours, rattling tunes ranging over the whole emotional gamut, and full of vitality. But at "Chatsworth" they prefer the anæmic potboiler. Some day perhaps you will have crowded folk-song concerts at which your best ballad singers will do for your national songs what at present they do only for the potboiler. If and when you do, our "Chatsworth" friends will learn the difference between a strong tune and a series of melodic *clichés* more or less supported by harmonic ditto. At present the fact of the series of *clichés* having been sung—for a consideration—by such and such eminent songsters outweighs any critical considerations.

'Rounds, again: think of the actual musical interest in such examples as Purcell's "I will not count," or "When first the sun," to name only two out of many.

'And what fun can be had (fun for both singers and hearers) in such jolly medley rounds as "Mr. Speaker," wherein three people represent that part of our

parliamentary proceedings known as a 'scene.' This is real honest, wholesome fooling, and when (as is often the case) the round is a piece of clever musical mechanics, the joke is all the richer. There is just that touch of incongruity which is the very essence of jokes of this kind.

'You should make more use, too, of songs with choruses. It is true that the modern dwelling-house, with walls so thin that on quiet days you can almost hear the people next door change their minds, seems hardly the place for chorussing. But choruses need not be shouted in a manner suggestive of the early stages of inebriation. Properly sung, in harmony, and the closure applied at a reasonable hour, neighbours would have little cause for complaint. At present they put up with many worse noises. Leaving the voice for the domestic instrument, what a pity it is more of your children do not play duets! There are thousands of pairs of brothers and sisters whose solo accomplishments are small, but who, if they joined forces, could obtain a musical result worth having. You can get all kinds of music, grave and gay, arranged duet-wise,—music difficult for one, but fairly easy for two players,—Bach's '48,' the Concertos, classical trios, chamber music, and symphonies, besides heaps of original music of all schools, ranging from some of Debussy's most elusive work to a Sousa March. Apart from the increased possibilities in the way of effects, the practice of duets would help players in many ways. But no! They *must* play solos!

'Ah! they are about to begin at "Chez Nous," and I must be on hand at the inauguration of what is to be the first of many musical evenings. I shall be disappointed with their choice of music, I fear. Barbara is about to open the ball with a piano solo. Of course she will assault the Prelude.'

'The Prelude?' I asked.

'There has been only one Prelude for years,' he replied, sadly; 'even as there has been only one "Spring Song," one "Wedding March," one "Intermezzo," and one "Humoreske." Barbara will never do more than splash round that prelude, but the result, though only approximate, will be sufficiently near for purposes of identification. . . Good-bye!' . . . He glided up the garden-path and disappeared through the front door, just as Barbara began to *strafe* the keyboard. Some of her leg-hits were a bit wild, and her timing was at fault, while she gave one distinct chance in the slips; but after a rather uncertain start

she settled down and scored so freely all round the wicket that I was sorry when Mrs. Mowdywarp came in to mend the fire, and dropped the scuttle in her astonishment at finding that I had not gone out after all.

The *Dunedin Magazine* winter number (issued by the Edna Publishing Co., Ltd.), vol. iii., No. 3, has an account of Mr. John B. McEwen's career and a full list of his compositions.