Review: Sir Hubert Parry on Bach

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before the hour for commencement, the pianist, Frederic Clay, hurt his hand so seriously that he could not play. Bird happened to be at the concert and was noticed by Sullivan, who asked him to the artists' room, and having ascertained that Bird knew the work induced him to undertake the pianoforte part without rehearsal. The readiness and capacity thus exhibited resulted in Bird being engaged as the permanent accompanist of the Society, a position he held until 1880. In addition to accompanying the many eminent artists engaged, he played concertos with the orchestra.

Bird remained organist of St. John's until November, 1858, and his next step in this branch of his now rapidly expanding professional work was to St. Mark's Church, Myddelton Square, Islington, a position he gained in a competition for which the late Dr. Hopkins was the umpire. In accordance with a custom now no longer current, this post brought with it much pianoforte teaching amongst the families of members of the congregation. In 1860 Bird again competed, this time for the organistship at St. Luke's, Chelsea, but George Carter was elected, and accordingly resigned his position at Holy Trinity, Chelsea, and the post there was offered to and accepted by Bird. As Mr. Carter stayed only a short time in the district there was a clear field for Bird to carry out a desire to found a large Choral and Orchestral Society. The organization was firmly established, and gave many important concerts at the Town Hall and sometimes in the Hanover Square Rooms. In this connection Bird met Weiss, the bass singer, and became his practice accompanist. Mr. Bird recalls that his own first London concert was given at Myddelton Hall, Islington, in 1860. At this début Mr. Henry Blagrove was one of the artists. It was at one of Mr. Bird's annual concerts that Mr. Plunket Greene made his first bow to a London audience. This was on May 16, 1888.

Through Mr. John Foster's influence, Bird was introduced as accompanist to some of the private musical societies which were much in vogue in the early sixties. One of these met alternately at the residence of Bishop Jackson at London House, and that of Mr. W. E. Gladstone at Carlton House Terrace. In 1866, Bird became organist of St. Gabriel's, Warwick Square, where there was the attraction of a full choral service, under the able direction of Mr. James Renwick. Then, in 1872, on the nomination of Turle, Bird was transferred to the new Parish Church, St. Mary Abbott's, Kensington. Here our bird of passage found something like a permanent home, for to this day he is caged at St. Mary's. At first the service there was very simple, and the choir consisted of ladies and gentlemen; but when, in 1875, Dr. Maclagan became vicar, a surpliced choir was introduced for the two chief services. Now there are two full choirs, as four services are given every Sunday. The first choir of twenty-six boys and eighteen men, partly paid, officiates at 11.30 a.m. and 7 p.m., and the second choir of twenty-four boys and twelve men, all voluntary, comes at 9.30 a.m. and 4 p.m. There are two assistant-organists.

Bird, soon after his appointment, began a series of annual concerts at Kensington, at which classical programmes were performed. He had known Mr. Alfred Borwick (father of Leonard Borwick) for many years. Mr. Borwick was an enthusiastic musical amateur, and was able to introduce Bird to many important circles. One of these gatherings was held at the residence of Mr. Arthur Burnand, and it was here that Bird as a frequent accompanist of the soloists came under the notice of Arthur Chappell, who later engaged him as the regular accompanist of the Monday and Saturday Popular Concerts, which were then in great vogue in musical circles. This position was the culmination in Bird's career as an accompanist. He was here brought into intimacy with many of the leading artists of the world. A noteworthy addition to the important duties of this period was a close connection with Plunket Greene as his accompanist. Since the abandonment of the Chappell Concerts, Bird's services have been much in requisition.

There are now in the field many able accompanists. The demands of modern music have created an ample supply. But all Henry Bird's confrères will yield him the tribute of respect and regard as a master of the art. They may rival him in efficiency, but they will never excel him in modesty and winning unobtrusiveness.

The following quotation from a lecture Mr. Bird gave some years ago may serve to guide the aims of students:

The greater the artist the more easy was it to accompany him; the highest achievement was, he considered, for a singer not to feel conscious of the accompanist, and this could only be when each had the utmost confidence in the other. Sight-reading ought to be studied according to the rational principles of general reading, and he strongly advised students to try and realise the sound of what they read with their mental ear. As to a knowledge of harmony, a composition was made up of chords and figures, which figures were again scales and broken chords: a practised eye would discover the harmonic groundwork, and then the player was on safe ground. He warned students not to expect everything to be acquired with mechanical rapidity, but to remember that 'the executive musician must first attain to perfect command over his physical resources, such command involving not only dexterity of hand, but a certain degree of ease and assurance: he must be possessed by a real love and enthusiasm for his art, and for the best things in it, and he must cultivate the faculty of sympathy which probably lies hidden in every real artist, whatever his medium of expression.'

SIR HUBERT PARRY ON BACH.*

Among the unreasoned—perhaps unreasonable—suspicions that may trouble an Englishman from time to time is one that reluctantly credits Germany with a better appreciation of Shakespeare than we have ourselves. Sir Hubert Parry's book may strengthen the lurking and more flattering conviction that Bach is best understood by the English. Both ideas have some show of sense. Such a mountain as the Weisshorn looks heavenly from a great distance; and a great man, like a great peak, is ideally seen from far. Moreover it would seem

* *Johann Sebastian Bach: The story of the development of a great personality.* By C. Hubert H. Parry. Illustrated. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London.

that in sacred works, in deeply devotional expressions of all kinds, it is easier to discover our intimate personal longings in a language that is a little remote from our own. Latin, some one has said, is the language of prayer; and though this be counted an untenable and even foolish proposition, it is certain that remoteness is often a help to spiritual perception. Some such reason would seem at least partly to explain the unique hold Bach's music has upon musicians of every school to-day. His titanic language has the essential aloofness. Distance has lent not only enchantment to him, but discernment to us. Further, one quite special reason suggests itself why present-day England should lovingly study the gospel according to Bach. There seems justification for the hope that our very slowness may enable us to maintain, if but feebly, the old spirit of the Christian religion, as it was manifested in Bach, virtually unbroken until the tyranny of aggressive atheism be quite overpast, and until Bach's childlike devotion to Christ is clearly seen to be an enlightened man's normal condition, and no passing phase founded on credulities which the splendid human progress of recent years is supposed to have shattered. Anyone with a real knowledge of the Church in England to-day can see that the said credulities are dying fairly painless deaths; they fall off one by one; the immutable foundations must remain. Bach in his deep sincerity built on the rock in the 18th century, and so it comes about that his devotional music rings true in the twentieth. The childish parts of his faith fall easily out of count, while every word which can quicken the indomitable human longing for perfection, and which received glowing life at his hands, still carries conviction.

As may have been supposed, this book on Bach proves to be of nothing less than national, perhaps it would be nearer the mark to say European importance. Sir Hubert shows Bach to his readers in extraordinary detail; but throughout it is his ideal, colossal personality that is presented, for the most part in a searching and always devoted analysis of his music. In the actual title, on the first page, on the last, indeed throughout the book, stress is laid upon personality to an extent that to smaller minds may possibly be dangerous. It is true that in the short general discussion with which the book opens, the reader is warned of 'the nature which is individual only in its littleness'; and still more significantly, the author points out that 'the great artist becomes the exponent of his contemporaries.' Bach clearly became that; still more clearly he became the exponent of his successors also. Sir Hubert's book indeed goes to show that Bach expounded ideal human nature, as we sometimes perhaps rashly say, *for all time*. A paradox seems to lurk behind this mystery of personality, as behind most mysteries, for there is certainly a supreme quality in Bach's best work which may fitly be called impersonal; and there is a sense in which the personality becomes great precisely as it becomes impersonal. Indeed it seems true in art as in religion that 'whosoever

loveth his personality shall lose it.' Sir Hubert's devotion for the person of Bach will not, it is to be hoped, get confused, even by the least close reader, with the false tendency (common enough to-day) sensationally to extol musical personality which attracts attention to and asserts *itself*. It is Bach's humanity that is here held up for our veneration.

'No other master,' writes Sir Hubert, 'shows in small things as in great, the same degree of consistent humanity.' Further on he says:

His humanity manifested itself in many and various ways. He delighted in frank rhythm. No composer ever attained to anything approaching the spontaneity, freshness and winsomeness of his dances . . . ; while many of his great choruses and his instrumental fugues are inspired with a force of rhythmic movement which thrills the hearer with a feeling of being swept into space out of the range of common things. But his ample humanity is equally shown in his love of melody.

There is, near the end of the book, a longer passage still more significant, which must also be quoted here:

It is the quality of the personality in Bach's work which is of such supreme importance and interest. Even if men on the advice of their chosen prophets abandon the old theory of the sincerity and nobility of art, human nature at least will pay tribute to the greatness of spirit, nobility of disposition, sincerity and singleness of heart which are so amply displayed. The foundation of Bach's musical personality is devotionism. But it was a devotionism so spacious and comprehensive that a large portion of its manifestations were emotions applicable to human life at large in its noblest phases.

So it is to his 'ample humanity' and the 'quality' of his personality and his 'spacious and comprehensive' devotion that the reader's attention is called; and Sir Hubert's sheer love of Bach for these things shines through the whole book and compels the reader to love and admire with him. When such admiration is combined with high critical powers and clear-sightedness, a great book is the natural result. It is to be hoped, in passing, that the author is a little too pessimistic when he pictures men and 'chosen prophets' who disavow 'sincerity and nobility of art.' Nobility, it is true, is an abused word, capable of a false reading, provocative of foolish and wasteful dissensions. But sincerity unites all schools; it claims and is claimed by everyone. It is surely the moralistic rather than the moral—Stevenson's 'Canting Moralists' in art—that annoys and sets up the back of the ardent reformer and so-called freethinker in music, whose thoughts are often the most restricted of all.

The plan of the book is as excellent as it is unusual. It is shown to be pre-eminently true in Bach's case, that biography can be adequately revealed in a man's works. Sir Hubert sees in the absence of legends about this great man a 'very high compliment.' He lives in the works themselves. 'Lesser minds are baulked by this, but those who are capable of communion with the highest manifestations of the human spirit are fortified.' But for all this the natural craving for some light upon the daily life of so great a 'spiritual ancestor' is admitted; and although according to the

deliberate plan of the book the story is told in illuminating analyses of the works in chronological order, the author seems to find great delight, as his readers undoubtedly will, in the light touches of biographical detail which, it must be added, are marshalled in a masterly fashion. He does not, like Spitta, feel bound to give the births, deaths, marriages, or careers of remote relations, or discuss water-marks in the paper used by Bach. But the reader is given such felicitous things as the young organist's reply to the rebuke of the authorities at Arnstadt, who reminded him that he had leave for four weeks and stayed four months: Bach, in reply, 'hoped his deputy had replaced him satisfactorily'! The refreshing impertinence of this remark must be taken together with the facts that Bach was already in hot pursuit of artistic excellence, for which four months at Lübeck may have seemed as four days to him: and that the unsympathetic authorities proceeded to complain that his variations on the chorales were 'surprising,' that he bewildered the congregation with 'many strange sounds,' that his preludes had been too long, and that when it had been pointed out to him he had made them too short.

In a preliminary chapter called 'Convergences,' the musical conditions preceding Bach's advent are summed up with Sir Hubert's well-known mastery of the internal evidences of musical history. In the chapter headed 'Preliminaries,' Bach's early surroundings are discussed; the happy combination of church and secular influences is specially noted; his successive moves to Ohrdruff, Lüneburg, Arnstadt, Mühlhausen and Weimar, and his journeys to Hamburg, Weimar and Lübeck are told. The consequent influences of Böhm, Reinken and Buxtehude are shown, and many of his earlier works described—notably the 'Capriccio' upon the departure of his brother, that early and surprising contribution to Programme music. The chapters which follow are successively called by the places in which Bach then worked—Weimar, Cöthen, Leipsic; in these lengthy chapters his compositions in those places are summarized and extensively analysed. The later Leipsic works, however, from the 'St. Matthew Passion' onwards, overflow into many separate chapters, being skilfully grouped under the titles Motets, Masses, Oratorios, the Latest Cantatas, the Clavierübung, &c., in such a way that, with the exception of the chapter on Secular Cantatas, there is no serious break in the progressive development of Bach's personality as reflected in his music. By this means the musical reader gradually feels the evolution of Bach's work and powers to be as engrossing as some fine book of travel. The lover of his music will time after time come across tenderly discriminating descriptions of the familiar masterpieces, and such accounts of those which are less well known as will probably send the reader straight to them to learn and to love them for himself. In the preface there is a quasi-apology for the technicalities which are necessarily discussed throughout the book. But seldom do these technicalities prove troublesome; for they are illumined by the author's unflinching

affection for his subject and by his keen comments which constantly quicken the reader's confidence and give insight into the musical history of the time. More than biographical issues are thus involved. For example, on p. 71 an experimental Clavier toccata is under discussion, and the situation is summed up in the following sentence: 'Bach was here trying to transfer an organ form to the clavier in terms of the Italian style.' On p. 90 the author discovers in the composer's choral work the 'habit of mind of watching for formulas which were apt for the pedals and which fortunately were effectively presentable by voices.' Again he throws light on Bach's two distinct uses of accessory ornamental or rapid passages—those which 'minister to a sense of exuberance of feeling, exaltation, fervour,' and those which form what may be called an 'expressive melisma.' Further, Sir Hubert is fond of showing how, by the scope of his gifts and by his deliberate plan of assimilating and improving upon the best works of every available sort, Bach practically gathered all the important threads of musical development into his own hand, weaving them as it were into one splendid strand, from which they all derived fresh strength. This is why the book often reads like a general history of music, without leaving its particular subject.

It is difficult to give more than slender indications of the methods and suggestive points of view to be found in this fine book. Few things are more interesting than the way in which Sir Hubert justifies Bach's habit of transferring movements from one work to another, notably from a secular to a sacred work. A musician who, like Abt Vogler, builds 'broad on the roots of things,' is likely habitually to express the deep, underlying human vitality of the words in hand; and in this case the same shade of energy may well inspire almost identical movements in connection with such different subjects as 'Die Wahl des Hercules' and the Christmas Oratorio. It is pointed out that, though perhaps unconsciously, 'special definite sentiments very often suggested to Bach similar types of musical figures'; and further, Sir Hubert predicts that

The clue to a great many of Bach's instrumental works may in future be found in the identification of the types of figure which are always related in his mind to particular moods and phases of sentiment.

In the touching chapter called the End, the highest point is assuredly reached. Never, it may be supposed, has the death of a great man been recorded before in a simple and pathetic strain of music; and never, surely, have deep affection and fine reticence conspired to frame a more moving final paragraph. It came about, we are told, that his last work, in the form (chorale) that he loved so dearly, was finished on his deathbed:

It is said that some time before, he had begun a chorale prelude on the tune *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein* ('When we are in deepest need'). He now completed it—tradition says by dictating the music to his pupil and son-in-law Altnikol—and with touching sincerity of devotion

he altered the title from the piteous expression of deepest need to the words *Vor deinen Thron tret ich* ('I come before Thy throne!'). Death had always had a strange fascination for him, and many of his most beautiful compositions had been inspired by the thoughts which it suggested. And now he met it, not with repinings or fear of the unknown, but with the expression of exquisite peace and trust. Music had been his life. Music had been his one means of expressing himself, and in the musical form which had been most congenial to him he bids his farewell; and only in the last bar of all for a moment a touch of sadness is felt, where he seems to look round upon those dear to him and to cast upon them the tender gaze of sorrowing love.

And with that last phrase his earthly labours ended, on July 28, 1750.

There is a long Postscript which not only sums up Bach's work and influence, but discusses the modern musical situation with more than a passing significance. It should frankly be admitted that there are signs of haste and faults of style in the book. Yet in spite of this, and bearing also fully in mind the unique extent and power of Sir Hubert's contributions both to English music and to musical criticism, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that he has done nothing finer than this discerning and faithful delineation of Johann Sebastian Bach.

A NOTE ON DEBUSSY.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

Where is historical criticism likely to 'place' Debussy in the long run? There can be little temerity in asking the question now, and trying to answer it. As I have urged in another connection, criticism is authorised to-day in attempting what would have been almost impossible in the past, when most people had to judge new music merely by an occasional hearing of it. Nowadays not only are performances more frequent, but practically everything a composer writes is made accessible to the student by printing; so that a year's hard work at even the newest composer will tell a modern student more about him than he could have learned in twenty years under the old system. And as Debussy has now been writing for something like twenty-six years, and there has been ample opportunity to study everything he has done, criticism can try to see and state the main results of it all without incurring the usual foolish gibe of being incompetent to estimate the value of contemporary art.

Of Debussy's present and ultimate importance in history there can be no question. He has stemmed, partially at all events, the vast and heavy tide of German music, showed us that music can talk beautifully and interestingly without

talking German, and has made the most advanced Teutonic art of the day seem to some people like the music of an epoch that is almost past. To have done anything like this, a man must have a great deal of vital force in him; whatever errors he may make, into whatever excesses or artificialities he may fall, there must be something seminal in his thinking. The question is, how much of his work will give pleasure in another generation or so, and how much of it will be regarded as the first stammerings of an art that has not yet fully mastered the language it would speak? It is possible for a man to give the most powerful and fruitful stimulus to art, and yet for little or nothing of his own work to outlive him. It was so, for example, with the Florentine reformers who founded the opera. On the other hand, the greatest and most enduring art seems to come only at the end of a long period of evolution, and to be as much the expression of a race or an epoch as of the individuality that utters it. Thus Bach breaks hardly any new ground for himself; he simply sums up and perfects the thinking of a century of musicians of all schools. His music could have had nothing like the strangeness, the sense of a wholly new voice, to Reinken and the other survivors of the old brigade as Debussy's music, for example, would have to a Strauss or a Wagner. One may broadly say, in fact, that this extremely new and personal note in art is the indisputable mark of a mind too individual in its sensations and its outlook to be capable of seeing the world very much as humanity as a whole does—which is what gives the greatest men their universal appeal. 'C'est dans les poètes du second ordre,' says Théophile Gautier à propos of Villon, 'que se trouve le plus d'originalité et d'excentricité. C'est même à cause de cela qu'ils sont des poètes du second ordre. Pour être grand poète, du moins dans l'acceptation où l'on prend ce mot, il faut s'adresser aux masses et agir sur elles Dix vers de Byron sur l'amour, sur le peu de durée de la vie, ou sur tout autre sujet aussi neuf, trouveront plus d'admirateurs que la vision la plus étrange de Jean Paul ou d'Hoffman: cela vient de ce que beaucoup de gens ont été ou sont amoureux, qu'un plus grand nombre encore a peur de mourir, et qu'il en est bien peu qui aient vu passer, même en rêve, les fantastiques silhouettes des conteurs allemands.' Edmund Gurney hit upon the same line of thought in his brilliant article on 'The Appreciation of Poetry,' where he argues that the poetry most *companionable* (happy epithet!) to a man is that which 'is most in harmony with familiar strains of thought and feeling; which, instead of encountering friction and resistance, or having to carve out its channel to his affections by sheer dint of beauty, finds channels already marked out for it to fill and overflow,' and that the moral sentiments being the most profoundly rooted in us [using 'moral,' of course, not in any merely didactic sense, but as expressing the deepest feelings of humanity as a whole upon the origin and destiny and meaning of life and the world], 'it is impossible, *ceteris paribus*, but that that