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Willem Mengelberg

Author(s): Alfred Kalisch

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The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

JULY 1, 1912.

WILLEM MENGELBERG.

It is not from any disrespectful motives that we head this article 'Willem Mengelberg' simply. It is his own particular wish. To call him 'Mr. Mengelberg' hardly seems right, his Dutch friends object to his being known as 'Herr Mengelberg,' and 'Mynheer Mengelberg' somehow looks strange.

Willem Mengelberg's first appearance in London was made on the occasion of the Strauss Festival at the old St. James's Hall in 1903. Those who heard him then remembered the remarkable vitality of his interpretations, and had not forgotten that Strauss looked on him as one of the greatest interpreters of his work, a fact sufficiently proved by the dedication of 'Ein Heldenleben' to Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam. It is one of the curiosities of London musical life that while so many dozens of conductors from every civilized country should have visited us, nine years should have elapsed before Willem Mengelberg again came to London especially as his fame on the Continent grew steadily all the time. The real reason is one which is scarcely flattering to our national vanity. A great many offers had been made in the interval to him for appearances in England, but the crude, bald fact is that he was receiving so much better fees everywhere else than those suggested to him by such indigent places as London, Liverpool, and Manchester, that he saw no reason for accepting them. This should be generally known, because ninety-nine Englishmen out of a hundred, if they think of such matters at all, still imagine that England is the best paymaster for music in Europe. The strict truth, on the contrary, is that Mengelberg accepted his recent engagement in London at something less than half the fee which he is wont to receive in some Continental cities. His case is curiously parallel to that of Tetrizzini, who also for a good many years would not come to London for less than the sum she received abroad, and also finally agreed to do so because she accidentally had some free time, owing to the cancelling of a previous contract. It was a similar chance which enabled Mengelberg to come to conduct the first concert of the Philharmonic Centenary season and to conquer London, with the consequence that, fortunately for us, he is likely to be a prominent influence in the orchestral music of this country for some time to come.

Willem Mengelberg comes of good artistic stock. He was born at Utrecht, on March 28, 1871, and his father, Frederick Willem Mengelberg, is well known as an authority on Gothic architecture and sculpture, and has taken a prominent part in the work of restoration at Cologne Cathedral. He

began his musical education at the School of Music of his native town, and continued his studies at the Conservatoire of Cologne, under Wüllner and Jensen. It had been his original intention to become a solo pianist, but in 1892 he was chosen from among more than eighty candidates as Director of Music in the city of Lucerne. It was there that he had his only experience of operatic conducting.

Three years later he was chosen conductor and director of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, as successor to Willem Kes, and that position he has occupied ever since.

He is also conductor of the 'Toonkunst' of Amsterdam, and five or six years ago he was chosen to one of the most important positions in Germany—that of conductor of the Museum Concerts and the St. Cecilia Concerts of Frankfurt-on-Main. He also conducts regularly every year in a good many cities in Germany, and his annual visits to Italy and Russia are eagerly looked forward to.

In 1881 the so-called Park Orchestra in Amsterdam, which had been conducted by W. Stumpff, was dissolved, and Amsterdam was without a permanent orchestra until 1888, when a syndicate was formed and erected the Concertgebouw, and engaged Kes, who worked up the orchestra to a very prominent position in Europe. In spite of this, however, the orchestra was, financially, not a success. For many years the deficit reached over £3,000. Since Mengelberg has been its conductor it has not only grown in fame, but has become a self-supporting institution. In the early days, among the most popular features of the concerts were the Concerto performances of the conductor, who used to conduct the orchestra from his seat at the pianoforte. While the Amsterdam orchestra has become famous as the interpreter of the most modern music, such as that of Strauss, Reger, and Mahler, whose works are perhaps more familiar in Holland than in their native countries, Mengelberg is also a most reverential lover of the great classics, and his Bach performances are looked upon as models. There was a wealthy music-lover in Amsterdam who organized at his own expense a great performance of the 'St. Matthew' Passion every Palm Sunday. At first this was done at considerable loss, but now it is so lucrative that it has to be performed three times every year, and each time results in a considerable profit. It may be added incidentally, as another proof of the solid form which love of art takes in Holland, that when it was suggested that the Amsterdam Orchestra should visit London for the Strauss Festival in 1903, the necessary guarantee, which it had been found impossible to raise in London, was forthcoming in Amsterdam in the course of a single forenoon. It may be mentioned by way of further digression that the Concertgebouw Orchestra enjoys a small subvention from the Municipality of Amsterdam, in return for which it has to give 'Popular Concerts' of classical music, for which the tickets cost fivepence. The Concertgebouw Orchestra

gives on an average a hundred and fifty concerts in a year in Amsterdam and the principal Dutch cities.

During May, Mengelberg has conducted a performance of Mahler's eighth Symphony in Frankfurt, before an audience of fifteen thousand people, and also in Berlin. After conducting in London in the middle of last month, he had to hurry back to Amsterdam to busy himself with the preparations for the Dutch National Musical Festival, which will have taken place by the time these lines are in print. The programme of this Festival is interesting, because it contains works by many composers whose very names are new to England. It is one of the great conductor's most cherished objects in life to encourage young composers of all countries. He is very enthusiastic about the possibilities of the Dutch school of music, but there seems to be the same difficulty about the emergence of a national school in the Netherlands as there is in the British Isles. The young Dutch composer seems to suffer from the same disabilities as our own musicians, and his compositions seem to be open to criticism of the same kind.

Willem Mengelberg has a very high opinion of our orchestras and their readiness to respond to the conductor's wishes. He told his friends that the wonderful flexibility and unanimity of the gigantic orchestra which he faced at the Albert Hall on the occasion of the Orchestral Association's 'Titanic' Concert gave him one of the greatest experiences of his life. He freely admits that he approached his task with a certain amount of scepticism, and without any hope that it would yield really artistic results, because his previous experience of very large orchestras with numerous 'passengers' had not been encouraging. A few minutes of rehearsal, however, speedily converted him. During his first visit to England, nine years ago, Mengelberg spent some time at the Handel Festival, and expressed unbounded admiration for the singing of the choir, although he can hardly be called a Handelian in the strict sense. In the last few years a considerable number of English artists have appeared with Mengelberg and his orchestra in Holland, and they have won golden opinions. Among them may be mentioned Mr. Ben Davies, Miss Fanny Davies, Mr. Lionel Tertis (who has played Mr. Dale's Viola suite several times), and Miss Myra Hess.

In private life Mengelberg is the most simple and unassuming of men. What strikes one most in a conversation with him are the manliness and sanity of the man, qualities which to the discerning listener are reflected in all his interpretations. There is no greater enemy of humbug and pretentiousness, either in the affairs of daily life or in art, than Mengelberg, and none with a keener eye for detecting them. Since his stay in Lucerne he has developed a passionate fondness for mountains and the simple life. He spends the greater part of every summer in Switzerland, and has recently acquired a little ch[^]teau on the hills in a part of the country off the beaten tourist track,

which he is having made habitable. He has, he says, caused respectful surprise to the primitive inhabitants of that remote valley by installing there an up-to-date bath-room. During his holidays he is a great walker, but his summer vacation is always busy, for that is the only time during which he can look through the numbers of scores which are submitted to him during the year. It may be interesting to know that during his four brief visits to London this season he has reaped a harvest, if the metaphor may be allowed, of something like forty British scores.

As a result of his early surroundings, he has an enthusiastic love of art, and often famous experts are glad to have his opinion on disputed questions in connection with Dutch painters. Anyone who, like the present writer, has had the privilege of being piloted through famous European galleries by him will be almost inclined to wonder that there is any room in his head for music. He is an enthusiastic collector, and spends as much time as he can in any town that he happens to be visiting, in seeing all that is to be seen and in bargain-hunting. He has not yet had time to explore London thoroughly. He envies us above all things the Halses in the Wallace Collection and the Maubuse in the National Gallery. His own art-treasures include pictures and furniture, but his special hobby is Eglomisé enamel. During his last visit to London he visited a good many of the most famous dealers, and at one of them the gentleman who showed him round afterwards inquired where he had his place of business. When he was informed that he was a musician he absolutely refused to believe it, saying that he had never met anybody outside the business who knew so much about things in general. History does not report his having any other hobby, unless it be Russian cigarettes. Like all musicians, he is fond of spending a 'busman's holiday' in hearing all the music he can, and he crowded as much concert- and opera-going into the few days of his visits to London as the hardest-worked musical critic. In this connection an interesting little fact deserves to be chronicled. On the evening before he conducted the 'Titanic' concert he arrived in London at 7.0 o'clock, feeling very tired, as he had conducted in Amsterdam the previous evening and had left at 7 a.m. He had the intention of going to bed early, but on arrival he discovered that Nikisch was conducting the Philharmonic concert, so he flung himself into dress-clothes without waiting to dine, and went to hear him. He has often conducted the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and Nikisch has often conducted the Concertgebouw Orchestra, but the two had never met till that evening, nor had Mengelberg ever heard—or should one say seen?—Nikisch conduct. The two great conductors met face to face for the first time at the supper given by the Philharmonic Directors at Paganini's. Though Mengelberg has now heard Nikisch, Nikisch has not yet heard Mengelberg. This fact throws a curious sidelight on the strenuous life of the modern travelling conductor.

In his youth Mengelberg composed a considerable number of important works, which are still heard occasionally in Holland, but he has not composed much of late years.

One of his theories is that it is a great mistake for an artist to try to attract attention by eccentricities of manner or personal appearance. This may seem a small matter in itself, but it is typical of one aspect of his character, which appeals very strongly to British ideals. This being so, there is of necessity not much to be said about his personal appearance. When he was younger it used to be said in Germany that he looked like a Rembrandt with a cherub face. He now looks like any man might look who has great responsibilities and leads an important enterprise. His manner on the platform is eminently simple and straightforward, and offers few temptations to dealers in flamboyant epithets. The clearness and tremendous decision of his beat must impress even the most casual observer from outside, and he inspires his players with confidence, because all he does is meant to guide them, and not to impress the public. He gives his cues in a most unmistakable manner, and wastes neither time nor energy in superfluous gyrations. He is one of the most 'decorated' musicians in Europe. The decoration of which he is proudest is the 'House Order' of Queen Wilhelmina, which has been bestowed by her only on a very few of her subjects, whom she holds in special personal esteem. It is in no way political or official, but purely personal, and carries with it the right of being saluted everywhere in Holland as a General-Officer.

No account of Willem Mengelberg is complete without mention of his wife, who has been his constant companion in all his travels, except when prevented by the illness of her parents. Madame Mengelberg is the most competent of business managers, and is endowed with the greatest charm of mind and manner. She is nearly as great an authority on matters of art as her husband, and, like him, is a most accomplished linguist.

Willem Mengelberg makes his next appearance in London at the first concert of the Philharmonic Society in November.

ALFRED KALISCH.

A NOTE ON BACH TRANSCRIPTIONS.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

Schweitzer, in his book on Bach, while recognising that transcriptions of the organ works for the pianoforte have done something to spread the knowledge of them, is mainly against transcriptions in general, and in particular against arrangements of the clavier works for the organ. On the latter point most people would probably be with him. As a rule there is little justification for transferring a work conceived in a smaller medium to a larger one, though there are a few exceptions that will occur to everyone. Max Reger has

arranged for the organ a number of Bach's clavier toccatas, preludes and fugues. I am doubtful of the success of some of these transcriptions, particularly of that of the Chromatic Fantasia; but it is a question I prefer to leave to organists. Schweitzer is probably right when he says that 'Bach's clavier works sound restless on the organ. A satisfactory registration cannot be discovered for any of them.' And again, 'The rhythm of the themes of the organ fugues is much simpler than that of the clavier fugues. A few quite elementary syncopations apart, scarcely an accent falls on the weak part of a bar; the main accent always falls on the strong beat. Bach sees quite clearly that any other than this natural accent is impossible on the organ. For clavier and for orchestra he writes much more freely. Thus the object of transcribing clavier fugues for the organ is incomprehensible. No one who really understands the nature of Bach's organ works can listen to transcriptions of this kind.'

The case is different however with transferences to a smaller medium of works conceived in a larger one. As Liszt said, the pianoforte is to the orchestra or the organ what an engraving is to a painting; it helps to disseminate and popularise big works of art. The real justification for these pianoforte arrangements is that, let the purists say what they will, artists delight in making them, the amateur delights in playing them, and the public delights in listening to them. One need not dwell on the obvious fact that were it not for these transcriptions many of the finest of Bach's organ works would be unknown to everyone but organists. To how many pianists and concert-goers, for example, has not Tausig's splendid arrangement of the D minor toccata and fugue brought a new revelation of the power of Bach's imagination? Liszt, again, with his transcriptions of the A minor, C major, C minor, E minor, and B minor preludes and fugues, and the G minor fantasia and fugue, must have opened up a new world to thousands of amateurs. Some loss there is bound to be in an arrangement of an organ work for the pianoforte; but the gain immensely outweighs the loss. Schweitzer, while recognising the good that has been done to Bach and to music by these pianoforte popularisations, still seems to have a lingering doubt about them, and pleads for the old-fashioned domestic style of performance of the organ works, with one player taking the manual parts and another filling in the pedals. That, however, is only a makeshift, and one that does not always act, as everyone can testify who has tried it. Moreover, by a curious paradox, it is only when we handle Bach's organ music with a little freedom that the pianoforte arrangement wins an appearance of naturalness,—only when we add something to him that we seem to get him native and intact. How to do this and yet not overdo it is the great problem of transcription.

The difficulty of arranging the organ works is not merely the facts that three staves have to be compressed into two, but that the pedal has often to be thrown into so low a register that one hand must be devoted to this alone—thus sometimes

From a photograph by Varischi & Artico Milar.



William Meyer.
