

South Staffordshire Musical Festival

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time before Bayreuth discovered in him a new Wotan and there granted him his stage début. It has much the same timbre in the medium; it betrays the same tendency to tremble slightly in moments of tenderness; it has in a still more remarkable degree the capacity for a *mezza voce* of infinite delicacy, a lovely *fil de voix* that can be attenuated and prolonged to a gossamer film of sound without losing either continuity or charm. No other bass or deep baritone now before the public possesses this exquisite *mezza voce* in the measure that Chaliapin does. He uses it with discretion, that is to say, only when occasion demands; and with all the greater effect because his amazing control of breath-pressure enables him to either swell or diminish tone from or to this 'thread of voice,' so that it runs through the whole gamut of strength and volume of which his elastic organ is capable. The power of the voice, like its compass, is not really extraordinary. All the three singers above named could produce louder, broader outbursts of open vowel-tone and more resonant deep notes than Chaliapin, who has none of the heavy reverberating timbre of the typical Russian bass. But to make up for it he can mount to the loftier regions of a genuine baritone with the smoothness inseparable from a faultless scale, while his attack in that part of the voice is equally clean and true. His 'effects,' consequently, are always safe and interesting to listen to. Whether spontaneous or studied, they obviously belong to the equipment of the clever vocalist no less than of the accomplished actor.

So much for the attributes that proved of most immediate use to the artist in his first essay at the Albert Hall. With all his ability, however, he could afford no more than an occasional fleeting glimpse of the superb delineator of 'Boris Godounov' and 'Ivan the Terrible' whom we saw during the early Beecham seasons at Drury Lane. He seemed to have been aware of this, since operatic excerpts formed no part of his programme. It is one thing, however, to avoid, as every artistic singer should, the objectionable habit of attempting dramatic action on the concert-platform, and quite another to bring to the interpretation of a song every expressive nuance of utterance and tone-colour that words and music should call forth. But whereas Chaliapin is a great actor, a great histrionic interpreter of human tragedy and passionate emotions, he is not, in anything near the same transcendent degree, what we still call a great 'Lieder-singer.' The two vocations present him, so to speak, upon different planes, and it is the magnetic quality of the man, the individuality of his style, his astonishing variety and instant command of colour and feeling, rather than nobility and grandeur of delivery or perfection of vocal method, that enable him to triumph. One might even be able to pick holes in his singing of the Russian ditties that he loves so dearly. But nobody would think of denying that he lives every moment of the drama he unfolds, or with what vivid and graphic touches he compels his listeners to live those moments with him.

As might have been expected, the closer proximity between artist and audience possible at Queen's Hall tended to enhance both interest and enjoyment at the afternoon recital on October 17. The ever-changing shades of colouring and expression were the more convincing for being studied at close quarters. The true quality of the voice could be clearly discerned, free from echoes and the distortions due to acoustical vagaries. On the whole, too, one felt that Chaliapin was singing well within his

physical means, and more like the singer whom the writer heard in his magnificent delineation of Boïto's 'Mefistofele' at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, some fourteen years ago. It was really satisfying now in every way to hear him in Schubert and Schumann. The intonation in 'Ich grolle Nicht' may have gone astray at a critical moment, but it may be doubted whether a finer rendering of 'Der Doppelgänger,' or even of 'Aufenthalt,' has ever been heard. And all in Russian, too! Truly, Chaliapin is a unique artist.

SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE MUSICAL FESTIVAL

Mr. Alfred Moss, a Walsall business man who is primarily an amateur musician and a poet, began to work more than twenty years ago for a musical festival in his district. He got matters well forward at one time, but the musician on whom the organization would have depended died; this was Swinnerton Heap, conductor of Societies at Walsall and Birmingham. But Mr. Moss did not let his desires languish; the idea has never been far from his mind, yet until Mr. Appleby Matthews became connected with Walsall music, he could find no one at once sufficiently capable and courageous to bring it into effect. The Festival was projected last March, and carried through satisfactorily from October 8 to 15.

Apart from a day at Lichfield, when a special service was held in the Cathedral, all the concerts were given at Walsall. Walsall is not altogether typical of South Staffordshire, nor is it the largest of the South Staffordshire towns. But it is the only one with a Town Hall, or, indeed, any other hall suitable for concerts. At Wolverhampton, for example, concerts are given either in the swimming baths, the water being drawn off and the bath floored over, or in the drill hall, a place designed for the convenience of two or three battalions of soldiers. Walsall impinges upon the Black Country, and among the towns of the district are Willenhall, Wednesbury, Great Bridge, Hednesford, Tipton, Cannock, Pelsall, Bilston, West Bromwich, Tamworth, Bloxwich, Darlaston, Tettenhall, Blackheath, &c., also the two great suburbs of Birmingham, Handsworth and Smethwick. But all this district is practically one enormous town; and the fundamental idea of the Festival is to bring about something of an amalgamation of its music. Walsall Town Hall is a fine room, with a good organ, and is part of a massive group of architecture that always astonishes visitors. Until neighbouring towns build suitable halls, the Festival must continue to be held at Walsall.

The present Festival was rather hurriedly arranged, and there is little need to discuss its defects, since these will be modified next year. The principal weakness was the appearance at concerts of performers who had no artistic abilities pronounced enough to justify their temerity, and *per contra* the non-appearance of other musicians who were unable to push their artistic claims. As the Festival is entirely democratic, this particular defect is contrary to its nature. A second weakness was one which eventually will be a cause of strength, and lay in the over-ambition of the various choral societies. Four societies severally provided the concerts, and each determined that its programme should be the most striking of all. Therefore difficult works were selected—works which few societies, other than those of the highest rank, could perform. The works

were prepared with the meticulous care a little male-voice choir devotes to the study of its competition test-pieces; rehearsals, indeed, were almost continuous through the summer and autumn, and each society arrived at a remarkable technical proficiency and an exact knowledge of the notes of its compositions. But beyond this, little was achieved in the Festival performances; the soul of the music was lacking. A third defect which I will mention was the inclusion by one or two solo singers of music which it was an impertinence to offer. These singers were severely trounced in the local press, and they will probably not pander again to their own vanity and to the weaknesses of their audiences.

Wars are sometimes won by the rank and file, and by the nation behind them, against the confused counsels and pessimism of the generals. This truism was reflected in connection with the South Staffordshire Festival. The choral societies never despaired of success; but as late as the end of September the Festival organizers determined to abandon the undertaking, until their move was crushed by the greater determination of Mr. Matthews to continue it.

The main outline of the Festival was as follows:

Monday, October 10. — Wolverhampton Musical Society (Mr. Joseph Lewis): Choral Fantasia, 'Miriabilia' (Clifford Roberts); 'Vanity of Vanities' (Granville Bantock); 'Go, song of mine' (Elgar). At this concert Mr. Frank Mullings, a native of Walsall, sang some Bantock and Strauss songs, and Mr. Claude de Ville played some Chopin.

Tuesday. — Walsall Philharmonic Society (Mr. Appleby Matthews): 'Gerontius.' The solo singers were Mr. Mullings, Miss Mary Foster, and Mr. Charles Harrison.

Wednesday. — Cannock Choral Society and Walsall Madrigal Society (Mr. Joseph Yates): 'News from Whydah' (Balfour Gardiner); 'Death on the Hills' (Elgar); 'God's time is the best' (Bach); and Madrigals. The Arthur Hytch String Quartet played several pieces, and joined with Mr. Arthur Jordan in a performance of the song-cycle, 'On Wenlock Edge,' of Vaughan Williams.

Thursday. — Wolverhampton New Choral Society (Dr. Darby): 'Hymn of Jesus' (Holst) and 'The Music-Makers' (Elgar). Miss Foster sang some Bantock songs, and Miss Margaret Harrison the 'Air de Lia' from Debussy's 'L'Enfant Prodigue.' There were several orchestral items, among them William J. Fenney's romance, 'Early Spring.'

Friday. — Walsall Philharmonic Society: 'The Hound of Heaven' (William H. Harris); 'Requiem of Archangels for the World' (Julius Harrison); and the first part of 'Hiawatha.' Mr. Mullings sang Bantock's 'Now,' the accompaniment having been orchestrated for the occasion; and Mr. Mullings and Madame Parkes Darby sang the duet from 'Lohengrin.'

The two Saturdays of the octave were filled with competitions for solo singers and choirs. All the performers were South Staffordshire folk, and the composers of new works (Harris, Harrison, and Roberts) are closely connected with the district. The City of Birmingham Orchestra played at four of the concerts. The audiences were large, except that on Wednesday. The income of the Festival exceeded the expenditure, but only because the conductors and the choral society worked without fee. A similar generous appreciation of the significance of the Festival on the part of all connected with it would have resulted in the creation of a good balance that could have been used next year in some process of educating the inhabitants of the district in the true appreciation of music. The audiences

were magnificently enthusiastic, but rather in the way of sport than of art.

Except for the performances of the Walsall Philharmonic Society (which had unwisely saddled itself with more than it could carry), the choral works were given with remarkable power, precision, and safety. Bantock's choral symphony is as a series of seven enormous part-songs; but the choir ended as fresh as it began. 'The Music-Makers' was a heavy work to listen to, lacking the charm of its fancy and the beauty of its 'pure' music. Holst's novel composition marched boldly through its course; but metrically—not rhythmically. One of the best pieces of work during the week was the finely dramatised performance of 'News from Whydah.'

Harris' 'Hound of Heaven' will not do for Francis Thompson's poem. I say this with regret, for Dr. Harris is a very fine musician, and a genuine composer who will do good work in the future. His piece has many charming touches, and a considerable amount of beauty. But it is entirely away from the poem, as he himself, perhaps, now perceives. I am astonished the Carnegie adjudicators recommended the setting; either they had not read the poem, or, reading it, had not understood it. Harrison's 'Requiem' is a piece of vigorous and straightforward music, well in keeping with Trench's poem, and a successful attempt to avoid conventional musical expression on the one hand, and modernism on the other. 'Miriabilia' is based on some passages from Psalm 119. It is an example of the good style of present-day choral writing. If Roberts had not been seduced into pictorial writing in the middle section, one could have said it was a work of homogeneity.

S. G.

London Concerts

BY ALFRED KALISCH

The most striking musical event in London since last I wrote has been the reappearance of Chaliapin. He has given two recitals—one at the Albert Hall and one at Queen's Hall—both of which were crowded. He may still be described as 'the great singer among actors and the great actor among singers.' It would be difficult to say to which of his two sets of qualities his extreme hold over an audience is chiefly due. His voice seems in itself to be fresher and rounder than it was when last he sang here in opera; but he has developed a skill in singing high notes *pianissimo* which is astonishing in a bass. He is a real interpreter, and makes each song a complete little drama, which is intelligible to most of us, although naturally the subtleties escape those who do not understand Russian. He publishes a booklet containing the English words of some songs, and announces which one he is going to sing, which of course is of some help to the audience.

In one or two of his songs, notably Rubinstein's 'Could it remain thus for ever' and Lishin's 'She Laughed' (a song of no great value in itself), his mastery of drama and pure singing were extraordinarily fine. Still it is in the more dramatic songs that he will be chiefly remembered—as, for instance, in Rimsky-Korsakov's song describing a Prophet's Vision, or Glinka's song narrating the Ghostly Midnight Review held by Napoleon's spirit, and above all in 'The Two Grenadiers.' He plays havoc with Schumann's rhythms (which may be partly due to the Russian translation), and takes liberties even