

SOME MEMORIES OF ETHELBERT NEVIN

By FRANCIS ROGERS

ETHELBERT NEVIN possessed a lyric gift of exceptional spontaneity and charm, by virtue of which his name as a composer is likely to achieve an honorable longevity. His music was the faithful expression of his inner nature. In this brief paper I shall not speak critically of his compositions or recount the story of his life, but shall, rather, try to offer a glimpse of that inner nature as I learned to know it in the course of a happy friendship with him.

I met him first at an evening party in Boston, where he was then living. I had never seen him, altho his songs had already won some celebrity, and I did not know he was in the room till I, with boyish rashness, had sung some songs which to a critical ear must have seemed well beyond my powers. I was still standing by the piano when Nevin came up to me and said some gracious words about my singing—what they were I have quite forgotten, altho I recall clearly his gentleness of bearing and speech and a certain air of melancholy.

Our next meeting took place a year or two later in Florence, where he was passing the winter with his family and I was studying with Vannuccini. We saw each other but seldom, for I was grinding hard in an Italian *milieu*, while he was the center of a group of stirring Americans. The old Tuscan city, with its rich records of a glorious artistic past, its bright sun and its warm-hearted, lovable inhabitants, was well suited to Nevin's temperament and he seemed very happy in its congenial atmosphere. In his garden dwelt a nightingale, whose full-throated serenades were a constant delight and inspiration to him, and to all such genial influences as these his sensitive, beauty-loving nature was fully responsive. The east wind of Boston had not been altogether favorable to the development of the best in him; the soft air of Tuscany brought to flower some of the loveliest of his inspirations.

But even in Florence he did not escape all the cool breezes of the Hub. One afternoon a roomful of us Americans had been listening to the exquisite playing of Buonamici, at that time the best of Italian pianists. I still recall the quizzical look that passed over Nevin's face when a spinster from Boston, to whom he had just been presented, asked him politely: "And are you fond of music, Mr. Nevin?"

The following winter found us both in Paris: I continuing my studies, Nevin settled in an apartment in Rue Galilée. Before long we were seeing each other constantly and intimately. He was the soul of hospitality and his little home became the much frequented *rendez-vous* of all the musical and music-loving Americans in the city. His celebrity as a composer was growing fast and everybody was eager to make his acquaintance. He was always easy of access, especially to young musicians. He was enthusiastic over the talented ones, and patient with the talentless; with the pretentious alone was he intolerant. With some, in whom he discovered unusual merit, he assumed the relation of critic and teacher, but I do not think he ever undertook to give them regular lessons—his nervous, highly-strung temperament was ill-suited to the wearing routine of teaching.

Despite all the petting and praise showered upon him, Nevin was always the simplest and least pretentious of men. The most real thing in life to him was his affections and emotions in their relation to those he loved and to his music. He had had excellent technical training, both as pianist and as composer, but his interest in matters of technique was always secondary to his concern for the true expression of the emotional content of a composition. It would have been easy to pick technical flaws in his singing and playing, but these were quite overlooked in the extraordinary pleasure he gave by means of the sincerity and musical insight of his interpretations.

His singing voice was naturally poor and he never, so far as I know, strove to improve its quality, but, nevertheless, his rendering of songs that appealed to him—indeed, he would sing no others!—was an unforgettable delight. Equally effective was his playing of the piano. His touch was extraordinarily lovely, and, apropos of this, I recall a story he once told me about his first public concert in Boston. Then, as now, pianos were furnished free of charge to artists of recognized standing, provided the name of the maker of the instrument appeared on the program. As Nevin was unknown, he was compelled to agree to pay cartage. A day or two after the concert, he went to the piano ware-rooms to settle his account, but was told by the smiling dealer that there was nothing to pay, because since the concert two grand pianos had been sold to purchasers who insisted on having instruments that were "exactly the same in tone as the one played on by Mr. Nevin."

Altho in his earlier days he had had a considerable piano repertory, when I knew him people were so constantly asking

him to play, as well as to sing, his own compositions that he performed but little else. I can see him now as he used to sit at the piano, body and head thrown back, a lock of his rather long hair falling across his heated forehead, everything forgotten in his eagerness to interpret truly the meaning of the composition.

He was of medium height and very slender. Without being emaciated, his frame appeared to carry neither flesh nor muscle. He had no liking for sports of any kind and seldom walked if a cab was available. Indeed, in his distaste for physical exercise, he was somewhat Oriental. Oriental, too, was his habit of squatting on one heel while he read and smoked contentedly. It would have been well for him if he had had a liking for exercise, which fatigues the body healthily while it refreshes the mind and the nerves, for the intensity of his emotional life made large drafts on his vitality. His senses were abnormally keen, especially his sense of smell and his hearing. He could recognize his friends, he told me, not only by their footfall but also by their odor.

Nevin's relations with his family and friends were profoundly sweet and loyal, and with all the many people he met he was invariably considerate and courteous. He had brought with him from Florence, in addition to an Italian valet, a Pomeranian puppy, of which he was devotedly fond—"Bob" or "Robert, toi que j'aime," as he used to call him. Unhappily, poor Bob's Tuscan constitution was unequal to sustaining the rigors of a Parisian winter. Nevin mourned his loss deeply and for weeks Bob's collar lay before him on his desk, an intimate souvenir of a departed friend.

Not for a moment would I have it thought that Nevin's emotional intensity made him neglectful of the rules and regulations of his art—he honored and loved it too much for that. His compositions, which sound so spontaneous and unstudied, were the result of an infinite amount of pains and self-criticism. Publishers might clamor and importune him for manuscript while a song or piano piece lay on his desk all but completed, but he never would part with a composition till he felt it was as nearly perfect as he could make it.

He never could bring himself to write to order. Unless he had something to say musically, he said nothing, and it is for this reason that almost all he wrote bears the touch of his characteristic freshness and charm. He was most scornful of a well-known American composer, who withdrew to the suburbs of Paris, in order to set twenty-two poems to music within the space of a fortnight.

Nevin was a delightful host. Wherever there was a piano he was an incomparable master of the revels and in his own house he was indefatigable in his devotion to the entertainment of his guests. He was equally admirable as a companion on informal excursions or in *tête-à-tête* conversation. I passed many happy hours with him in and about Paris. There were some joyous (though rainy) days together at Fontainebleau, and an excursion with two other American musicians to the home of Mlle. Chaminade, where everybody made music and paid each other compliments, finally toasting our gracious hostess in glasses of her own sweet champagne. What fun it would be to live those days over again!

Nevin returned to America in the summer or fall of 1897 and established himself in New York in an apartment on West 57th Street. I came home towards the end of the year. On my arrival, altho his apartment was none too large for his own household, he insisted, with characteristic hospitality, on my being his guest till I could find permanent quarters of my own. He was planning several concerts of his own music in some of the large cities and engaged me to sing in them. The first of these concerts took place in Pittsburgh, which was really his home city, for he had passed his boyhood in Sewickley, a suburb, where his parents and many relatives still resided. The return of "Bert" Nevin was a momentous event for the whole region, for he and his people were respected and liked by everybody. Carnegie Hall, on the night of the concert, was full to overflowing with his numerous family connections, his old friends and a new public, which as yet knew him by reputation only. Of the details of this concert I remember little; I recall only that every number on the long program was applauded rapturously, that there was a vast quantity of flowers passed over the footlights, and that no returning artist could have possibly received a heartier welcome home after a long absence.

Our second concert was to take place in New York. A few days before the concert I was dining with the Nevins in New York. Mrs. Nevin's sister, Mrs. Frank Skelding of Pittsburgh, and her husband were of the party. After dinner Nevin sat down at the piano, as was his custom, and began to play. After a little he handed me a slip of music-paper with the voice part and the words of a song scribbled on it in pencil, saying as he did so, "Here is a song I want you to sing at our concert next week." I deciphered my part as best I could, while Nevin played the accompaniment from memory. Except for the pencil

manuscript then in my hand, I doubt whether any part of the song had been committed to writing. The song was "The Rosary."

Our little audience approved of our efforts, but Mr. Skelding professed to doubt our ability to get the song ready for public performance in so short a time, and after some good-humored discussion offered to bet Nevin a champagne supper for all present that the song would not be sung at the New York concert. Nevin accepted the wager and won it, for the following week, February 15, 1898, in Madison Square Garden Concert Hall, we gave "The Rosary" its first public performance. It made, as one paper put it, "the hit of the afternoon."

The text of "The Rosary" had been sent by some correspondent to Nevin who recognized at once its fine lyric quality and, with my voice in mind, set it to music. He knew nothing at the time about the author, Robert Cameron Rogers, nor did Mr. Rogers know anything about him. The life of the song has been one of great and undiminishing prosperity. Soon after its publication, I sang it in England to appreciative ears, and I am told that it has retained its popularity there just as it has here. No sentimental song written by an American since the immortal melodies of Foster (who, by the way, was an intimate friend of Nevin's father) has enjoyed such lasting popularity as this, the masterpiece of Nevin.

A roseate glow suffuses my memory of the evening in Pittsburgh, but my recollection of our New York concert is somewhat charged with gloom. Nevin's music was well and favorably known in New York, but he himself was almost a stranger and without the personal following on which he could safely count for support in Pittsburgh and Boston. Madison Square Garden Concert Hall was much too large for his public and not suited acoustically to the intimate character of the program. Everything went askew from the very first. Besides Nevin, who presided at the piano, and me, there were another singer, a violinist and a 'cellist. We were told to report at the hall not later than three o'clock. I arrived punctually and found in the dressing-room two of the company, but not Nevin and the other singer. Without Nevin the concert, of course, could not begin, but the passing minutes did not bring him, or news of him. Half an hour passed, three quarters, but still no Nevin. The audience was very weary and impatient. Finally, about four o'clock, somebody burst into the room, gasping: "Where have you been all this time? Mr. Nevin is nearly distracted." Of all absurd situations: there were *two* dressing-rooms, one on each side of

the stage. While Nevin was pacing the floor of one in an agony of impatience, the major part of his troupe were chafing over his absence not fifty feet away.

After such an inauspicious prelude, it was quite beyond our powers to awaken in our hearers anything like the enthusiasm we had hoped for—we, as well as they, were quite out of the right mood. After some minor mishaps on the stage, I, to cap the climax, became hopelessly confused in the words of one of my songs. I managed to keep going, but Nevin, fearing a complete break-down on my part, in his agitation managed to knock his music from the rack to the floor. I still have a picture in the corner of my eye of poor Nevin fumbling with one hand on the floor for the fallen sheet, while with the other he was attempting manfully to play the accompaniment. Under the best of conditions the program would have been long; “under the bludgeonings of chance” it was interminable. Long before the final numbers, the audience began to melt away and we were left to bring the program to a close towards six o’clock in an almost empty hall.

The last concert of the series we gave in Steinert Hall, Boston, repeating the program we had just performed in New York. There were no memorable mishaps on this occasion and Nevin’s many friends once again bore willing testimony to their affection for him personally and to their admiration for his musical gifts. As a matter of course he had to play for them his delightful “Narcissus” and “The Rosary” appealed to their sensibilities just as it had to those of the New York public.

Shortly after the Boston concert, I sailed for Europe and did not see Nevin for many months. When we met again, his failing health had already begun to curtail his musical activities and, as time went on, he withdrew more and more from public view. In March, 1900, I took part for the last time in a concert of his compositions, given in Carnegie Chamber Music Hall, New York, at which his “Captive Memories” had its first public performance. After his removal to New Haven, which did not long precede his death, we met only occasionally and then quite by chance when he came to New York for the day.

The death of Nevin removed from musical life in our country a unique and delightful figure, for he possessed, in addition to remarkable musical gifts, personal qualities that endeared him to all those with whom he was thrown with any degree of intimacy—a loving and lovable personality, with a streak of genius running through it.