

Review: Giacomo Puccini's Opera "Le Villi"

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MUSICAL GUILD.

Two Concerts of a second series of four were given last month (on the 12th and 27th ult.), at the Kensington Town Hall, by the band of former Royal College students, now known as the Musical Guild. At the first, which is the only Concert we can at present deal with, a programme of considerable interest was put forward, headed by Spohr's Double Quartet in E minor (Op. 87). This work, in common with much more of Spohr's music, does not deserve the neglect into which it has fallen. It is the third, and is generally acknowledged to be the best of the four examples of its class that the composer has left behind, and we give the youthful members of the Musical Guild warm credit for reviving it. We may also speak with unreserved praise of their performance, which satisfied every requirement. The executants were (first quartet) Mr. Arthur Bent, Mr. Wallace Sutcliffe, Mr. Emil Kreuz, and Mr. W. H. Squire, and (second quartet) Mr. Edgar Hopkinson, Miss Zoe Pyne, Mr. H. Hobday, and Mr. J. T. Field. Two clever young artists, Miss Zoe Pyne and Miss Marian Osborn, gave an excellent interpretation of Dr. Hubert Parry's "Partita" for violin and pianoforte, in D minor; and Brahms's Pianoforte Quartet in A major (Op. 26) received full justice at the hands of Miss Annie Fry, Messrs. Bent, Kreuz, and Squire. This made up the sum of the instrumental pieces, all of which were followed with evident interest and applauded with discrimination by a numerous audience. The vocal element was furnished by Mr. Daniel Price, who sang with his accustomed intelligence and artistic feeling Handel's "Revenge, Timotheus," and a song by Miss Kate E. Boundy (a member of the Guild), entitled "My gauntlet's down."

BOROUGH OF HACKNEY CHORAL ASSOCIATION.

THE work done by this enterprising Institution, under its gifted Conductor, Mr. Ebenezer Prout, almost invariably calls for the commendation due to high artistic purpose and excellent achievement. Among such instances we must assuredly place the revival at the first Concert of the season, on the 18th ult., of Spohr's well-nigh forgotten Oratorio, "The Fall of Babylon." The successor of "Calvary," and, like that fine work, produced for the first time at a Norwich Festival (1842), "The Fall of Babylon" seems never to have taken the least hold upon popular favour. It was given under Spohr's direction by the Sacred Harmonic Society in 1847, and again in the following year; but the total number of performances in London, if not the country also, could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The libretto, by the late Professor Edward Taylor, has missed the dramatic opportunities of the subject; while the music, albeit replete with the melodic charm and grace and contrapuntal resource ever characteristic of Spohr, fails to reach at any time the height of sublimity attained in portions of "The Last Judgment." Nevertheless, "The Fall of Babylon" is, on the whole, a sufficiently interesting work to deserve occasional hearing, and certainly too good an example of its composer's genius to merit oblivion. We repeat, therefore, that the Hackney Choral Association accomplished a useful service in reviving the work, apart from affording an apparently delightful evening to its patrons and supporters at the Shoreditch Town Hall. The choruses were given with spirit, and no lack of delicacy or precision; the solos being competently sustained by Madame Isabel George, Miss Rose Dafforne, Miss E. J. Turner, Mr. Henry Piercy, Mr. Andrew Black, and Mr. Henry Pope. Mr. Prout conducted with his habitual watchfulness and zeal.

MUSICAL ASSOCIATION.

At the first meeting of the present session, held on the 4th ult., at 27, Harley Street, W., a paper was read on "The Musical Scale," by the Rev. W. J. Habens. The lecturer first of all dealt with the importance of the prime numbers 2, 3, and 5, and showed that these numbers alone, together with the various powers and numbers arising from their inter-multiplication, were capable of expressing the ratios of notes belonging to the same scale.

Then, turning to the construction of the scale, the inaccuracies of equal temperament were displayed, and it was shown that for true intonation we required fifty-two notes to the octave—seventeen, however, could be dispensed with. Of the thirty-five notes remaining, two were required for B flat or A sharp, and three for every other existing note. Each existing note had three forms—grave, middle, and acute—and from these were derived the above large number of notes to the octave by fifths ascending and descending. Mr. Habens admitted the conveniences of equal temperament and the strong position that it occupied, but argued that there was a necessity for two forms of the supertonic at least, as one form could not represent both the note which lay a fifth above the dominant and that which lay a fifth below the submediant. The reading of the paper was as usual followed by a discussion.

DR. MACKENZIE'S VIOLIN CONCERTO
AT BERLIN.

DR. MACKENZIE'S Violin Concerto (Op. 32), which had been introduced to Berlin connoisseurs by Señor Sarasate last winter, was again most successfully interpreted in the northern capital, on October 26, by Herr Waldemar Meyer, at the Berlin Sing-Akademie, with the assistance of the Philharmonic orchestra, and before a numerous audience. The following notice, which we extract from the *Kreuz Zeitung*, will be sufficient to show that the "long-continued applause," which rewarded the interpreter at its conclusion, was as much due to the work as to the player. "We can only welcome with pleasure," the journal quoted says *inter alia*, "the new epoch in matters musical in England, an epoch which is manifestly favouring the production of works of art of permanent worth. In proof thereof we need only mention the names of Parry, Stanford, Sullivan, and Mackenzie, whose compositions have, in part at least, already gained a firm footing in Germany. The Concerto in C sharp minor of the last-named composer is, without doubt, a most interesting work, extremely well elaborated and finely scored. It contains, moreover, passages of striking beauty, such, for instance, as the second theme of the opening movement; nearly the entire *Laigo*, and the initiatory 'motive' of the final division. The latter, worked out as it is in a masterly manner, sheds a lustrous light over the whole movement, thus surpassing in immediate effectiveness its predecessors, although the latter are by no means inferior to it in artistic value. The solo instrument has, as a matter of course, been specially favoured by the composer, who has afforded the interpreter every opportunity for the display of a brilliant technique. There is no coquetting here, however, with empty phrases for the sake of mere display, and nearly all the florid passages grow naturally out of the thematic structure of the work. We certainly look upon Mackenzie's Violin Concerto as a distinct acquisition to the literature for the instrument, and have no doubt that it will soon be generally introduced into the Concert-room."

GIACOMO PUCCINI'S OPERA "LE VILLI."*

IN THE MUSICAL TIMES of June last I gave a brief outline of Signor Puccini's opera "Edgar," about that time produced at the Scala of Milan, and on that occasion I referred to another work of his, "Le Villi," which preceded "Edgar" by some years, and was, indeed, Signor Puccini's first effort in the field of lyric drama. "Le Villi," which has recently been revived at the "Teatra dal Verme," was brought out at the same theatre in 1884, under somewhat remarkable circumstances.

Signor Sonzogno, the enterprising music publisher of Milan, had instituted a committee for the selection of a competitive prize opera, and this committee rejected Signor Puccini's "Le Villi." The young composer, however, undaunted by this rebuff, succeeded in having the first fruit of his musical talents produced at the "Teatro dal Verme," where, lo and behold, in the very midst of the academic wisecracks, it achieved a genuine triumph which, to use a homely phrase, gave Signor Puccini an enormous lift, and became the cause of the opera being performed

* "Le Villi." Ricordi and Co. Milan.

all over Italy as a brilliant exemplification of the adage—"Vox populi, vox Dei."

Ever since then the "Teatro dal Verme" has looked upon "Le Villi" as its own child, which never fails to attract the public whenever it appears on the stage, and it is on account of its singular history, no less than by reason of its intrinsic merits, that this opera deserves more than a passing notice.

As in "Edgar," so in "Le Villi," Signor Puccini was fortunate in securing an effective libretto from the pen of Signor Ferdinando Fontana, an excellent writer, apart from his special aptitude for dramatic poetry.

The scene of "Le Villi" is laid in the Black Forest, and the story is founded on a local legend, according to which the unfaithful lover of a village maiden (who dies in despair) is, on his return to his native valley, enticed and killed by the spirits of the forest, called the "Villi." The lover in this case is a young villager, *Robert*, who, on the eve of his marriage with *Anna*, the daughter of a sturdy old peasant, is suddenly called away to Mayence to receive the legacy of a relative. Although *Robert* vows that he will return to make his bride both happy and rich, she is full of sinister forebodings; and these prove only too true, for at Mayence *Robert* falls a victim to the charms of a wicked siren, who not only despoils him of his money, but makes him forget his love in the Black Forest. In the meantime the poor village maiden dies in despair; and when *Robert* at last returns to the valley in the depth of winter, poor, and full of remorse, she appears to him as a spirit, not of love but of retribution, and allures him away to the spirits of the forest, who surround him, and in their mad dance whirl him to death, while *Anna* is carried aloft.

The opera consists, properly speaking, of two acts, and a "symphonic intermezzo." This latter, a highly characteristic part of Signor Puccini's work, is divided into two "tableaux," entitled respectively "l'Abbandono" and "la Tregenda": one the funeral procession of *Anna*, during which a chorus for female voices relates *Robert's* betrayal of his bride at Mayence, her sufferings, and her death; and the other, illustrative of the legend of the spirits of the forest dancing by moonlight in the snowclad valley.

This "intermezzo" is an extremely imaginative and original piece of programme-music, and it was probably the fact of the young composer having struck out an altogether novel course as compared with the orthodox conception of a well-regulated opera, that horrified the "academicians," and induced them to reject his work rather than to establish a heretical precedent by countenancing so daring an innovation. The other numbers of the opera calling for special notice are, in the first act, *Anna's* air "Se come voi piccina io fossi," as well as her beautiful prayer, "Angiol di Dio," and her duet with *Robert*, "Tu dell' infanzia mia"; and in the second act, *Robert's* air on his return, "Ecco la casa," and the duet and *Finale*, in which *Anna*, reminding him of his promises, repeats the air "Tu dell' infanzia mia" with great dramatic effect.

The opera is preceded by a Prelude, in which the principal musical themes are introduced, and here, too, Signor Puccini gives proof of skilful writing and careful workmanship. The work is throughout characterised by great wealth and a natural flow of melody, and it is this which, together with the attractive subject, the novel idea of the "symphonic intermezzo," and the effective musical and dramatic treatment, won for Signor Puccini's "Le Villi" the popularity it has enjoyed ever since its first production, a popularity enhanced by the fact that this interesting work came to be regarded by the public in the light of a standing protest against professional pedantry.

C. P. S.

OBITUARY.

MADAME MARIA BEVIGNANI, wife of the much esteemed Conductor, Signor Bevnigani, died on the 9th ult., at Sestri Ponente, Liguria, in her 42nd year. She had been unwell for some months past, but her death was somewhat unexpected. She was very popular in musical society, and her box at the opera, when her husband was Conductor at Covent Garden Theatre, was always a pleasant rendezvous. She, with her sister, Augusta Kruls, now Mrs. Dickinson, were the nieces of the late *prima donna* Teresa Titiens.

THE death of Frederic Davison, of the firm of Gray and Davison, on the 18th ult., is announced. He was in the 76th year of his age. He married Louisa Gray, the daughter of John Gray, organ builder, and became the partner of his father-in-law, who died in 1849. Under his direction many large organs were built throughout the country, the most famous of which are those in the Town Halls of Bolton, Glasgow, and Leeds; the Crystal Palace, Magdalen College, Oxford; St. Pancras Church, St. Paul's, Wilton Place, and others.

Few of the St. James's Hall *habitués*, being told that an old-fashioned, high-coloured listener who seemed to have grown to his seat there was GEORGE RUSSELL, recognised the name as familiar; yet forty years ago it bid fair to denote a distinguished pianist. MR. RUSSELL, however (who died on the 12th ult., of consumption, at his residence, Croydon), had the "damnosa hæreditas" of being a precocious child-performer, and at the age of eight figured in the same programme with Liszt in a Concert at Her Majesty's Theatre. At a later period he came before the public in the series of Concerts given by Alfred Mellon in the Floral Hall, where he was successful; but his rare natural gifts were drawn upon too early; he failed to keep up with the times, and passed into the cold shade of teaching.

We regret to have to announce the death of FREDERIC CLAY. He was born in Paris, August 3, 1840, and studied music chiefly under Molique. The greater part of his compositions were written for the stage, but he also composed two Cantatas, "The Knights of the Cross" and "Lalla Rookh," besides a number of songs, many of which have attained a wide popularity. For some time previous to his death he was afflicted with paralysis. He died at his residence, Oxford House, Great Marlow, on the 24th ult.

MUSIC IN BIRMINGHAM.

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)

THE season, so far, has not falsified the promise of its opening, and in interest and excellence the Concerts which have been given this month could not easily be surpassed, though their number is less than in some previous years. Instrumental chamber music is again coming to the front, and it is encouraging to note that there is no lack of support this season for high-class entertainments.

Perhaps the most important event of the month was the first Concert of Mr. Stockley's seventeenth orchestral series, which took place in the Town Hall on the 17th ult., when the new Symphony by Mr. Frederic Cliffe was the *pièce de résistance*. The composer, who conducted his work, is a native of Bradford, and a Professor of the Royal College of Music. This Symphony, which is his first work of any importance, was produced at one of the Crystal Palace Concerts on April 20 last, and proved such a success that the Philharmonic Society included it in their programme at St. James's Hall on June 6. To Mr. Stockley we are indebted for its third performance. It was capitally rendered throughout by Mr. Stockley's well-trained band, and the appearance of Mr. Cliffe as Conductor provoked enthusiastic applause. There can be no doubt that the Symphony has secured a high position in the musical world, quite apart from the fact of its being the first work of so young a composer. The other orchestral pieces were Meyerbeer's "Schiller" March, Mackenzie's "Benedictus," Weber's "Der Freischütz," and Beethoven's "Egmont." Overtures, Sullivan's "Graceful Dance," from his incidental music to "Henry VIII.," and Wagner's "Träume," of which the solo part was admirably played by Mr. F. Ward. A Ballata entitled "Cicalio," by Tito Mattei, also met with great favour. Madame Nordica and Mr. Ben Davies shared the vocal numbers, the lady's most successful performances having been Mr. Cliffe's song "Far away from thee" and Gounod's vocal waltz "Nella Calma." Mr. Davies was heard to greater advantage in "The sailor's grave," by Sullivan, than in the spirited air from Parry's "Judith," "God breaketh the battle."

In celebration of the opening of a new organ at St. Paul's Church, Lozells, on the 2nd ult., a series of daily Recitals, extending over a week, was given by different performers, including Mr. Astley Langston, Dr. Rowland Winn, Mr. Theodore Tearne, and others.