

Some Thoughts on Unaccompanied Song

Author(s): Gerrard Williams

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who want to hear and see famous singers—which is quite another thing. Moreover, the Albert Hall, admirable for fancy-dress balls and performances by massed choirs or bands, and as a Tom Tiddler's ground for famous singers and prize-fighters, is notoriously bad for orchestral concerts. There are a few spots where an orchestra may be heard to advantage, but there are many more where we get the balance all wrong, and sometimes even hear a ghostly second orchestra hard on the heels of the real one. As these spots are not labelled, you never know what you are in for until you have got it.

Mr. Harold Rawlinson writes a good deal to the point. He thinks that the 'Proms.' have a decided pull in taking place before the amateur performers of all kinds start their winter's work with the local choral and orchestral societies. He is sure, too, that they succeed largely because of the excellent advertising methods of Messrs. Chappell. As an example of intelligent publicity he mentions the fact that every year since 1910 he has received an advance copy of the season's programmes, merely because he subscribed for a season ticket in 1910. (*That's the way to catch and retain a public.*) On the other hand he has sent many times for tickets for L.S.O. and Philharmonic concerts, but has never received a prospectus of their season. (And that's the way to do the other thing.) He ends by drawing attention to the visit of the Belgian Royal Fanfare Band, as a tragic example of a fine opportunity missed through want of advertising. (This matter is touched on in 'Occasional Notes.')

Another reader is emphatic—even profane—on the absurdity of charging high prices for front seats. As he says, at the cinema you pay extra to sit a good way back where you may see to advantage. But then the cinema is a new form of entertainment, whereas the concert is sufficiently old to have grown a crust of convention. In its early days, when performances were mainly by soloists, when the biggest forces employed were little more than the chamber music of to-day, and when keyboard instruments could do little more than emit a stringy tinkle, a front seat was obviously the one to make for. But why make for it now, in these days of big orchestras and choirs, and thunderous concert grands?

Finally, a letter signed 'Student,' pleading for more cheap seats. He says 'it is financially impossible for us young fellows to attend more than three or four good concerts per year, however keen we may be.' Concerts as a rule have always done too little for 'young fellows.' They can drop into the cinema or the variety theatre on any night of the week, sure of comfort and a good show at a low cost. This 'dropping in' is half the battle. Save in the case of the 'Proms.,' going to a concert means looking up details as to halls, dates, times, programmes, prices, &c. Those of us who live the longest will see the most, but I am going to risk a prophecy that before you and I are ten years older London and most other

big cities will have a real music-hall, bang in the middle of things, with a good orchestra, excellent programmes (changed weekly), with light relief in the way of good humorous singers, low prices, cheap refreshments, and smoking. Roughly, it will be an inversion of the so-called music-hall or variety theatre. At these places we find an entertainment on the amusing side, with a little good music thrown in. At our real music-hall we shall have a popular concert with a little amusement thrown in. There you will find 'us young fellows' enjoying a 'Prom.'-like programme, with comic relief, all the year round. Why not? We have a cinema public and a theatrical public, because the cinema and theatre doors are open as the normal state of things. We shall never have a musical public in the same sense so long as concert-going, instead of being a low-priced, easy, and normal thing to do, is a more or less expensive adventure. And when you come to think of it, there is irony in the fact that in a country calling itself musical, you may hear orchestras every night throughout the year, weekdays and Sundays, at restaurants, cinemas, theatres, and variety houses, wasting music on thousands of inattentive folk who are eating, talking, or going out to see a man about a dog, whereas if you want to hear an orchestra *not* wasting itself, but playing music to be listened to, you are limited to a comparatively small number of evenings and Saturday afternoons in the winter, and to the West-end of London. There's something wrong here.

SOME THOUGHTS ON UNACCOMPANIED SONG

BY GERRARD WILLIAMS

Although unaccompanied song is apt to be dismissed as a 'stunt,' it has very distinct and very interesting possibilities. After all, there is little that cannot be placed in that category if we are so minded, but similarly there is little that will not yield results to serious and sincere effort. It is with this in mind that I shall try to set out the possibilities, limitations, and essentials of unaccompanied song as I see them.

The selection of words for setting is a far more delicate problem than in the case of accompanied song. Not only must they be of the very highest standard—remembering that now, if ever, they will be audible to the audience, and will play an unusually large part in the creation of the atmosphere of the song—but also the choice of subject and its literary treatment are very severely limited. By its nature unaccompanied song seems to me to postulate a reflective intimacy, as though the singer were concerned with his own thoughts alone, not with any 'message' to be delivered to the audience in the conventional manner. Although, by association, words of the folk-song type may to some extent justify their choice, I feel that the ideal unaccompanied song subjects are those which, if years of convention be dismissed from mind, would strike the hearer as unnatural with all the paraphernalia of accompaniment. I believe this limitation is open to some argument; but although it may be slightly

widened on occasion, I think that it must in general be respected if the song is to be convincing and avoid all suspicion of pose.

Having obtained suitable words, we are faced with at least equal restrictions in the setting. In spite of all arguments to the contrary, I do not believe that the human mind at its present stage can hear a melody alone *qua* melody; consciously or unconsciously (most often, of course, the latter) the hearer will supply some sort of harmonic basis, even if this amount only to a vague drone. He may not be able to translate it into actual sound, but it is there as the corollary of his understanding of the tune. Now let us divide melody into three general, but workable categories: the diatonic, the chromatic, and the modal. The broadest diatonic melody can be led off the beaten track by means of subtleties of accompaniment; but without accompaniment the hearer, taking as always the line of least resistance, will furnish himself with an obvious 'tonic and dominant' explanation, and the whole thing will remain commonplace. On the other hand, chromatic melody, by which I mean melody with constantly shifting and abstruse tonality, is dependent upon its accompaniment for explanation; without this accompaniment the mind cannot follow its wanderings, and the whole thing sounds vague and meaningless. There remains the modal type of tune, and here in general I think salvation lies. We can be clear without the risk of sounding commonplace; the tonality can shift constantly yet intelligibly; and there is always the element of freshness and unexpectedness in a well-written tune of this type. In my opinion—and this applies even more strongly if a diatonic or chromatic melody be attempted—the aim should be to define the tonality by the notes themselves, including in the melodic outline the essential underlying harmonies, so that the hearer may not have to fall back on his own 'explanation.' And in the result the tune should be such that if an accompaniment be added this would merely duplicate more or less what is already present in the vocal line, and thus prove itself superfluous technically as well as artistically.

Finally, I think that the limitations are just as strongly present when the possibilities of performance and popularity come up for consideration. By reason of the merciless exposure of every little fault of voice and phrasing, and owing to the absence of any help from an accompaniment in obtaining the atmosphere, none but the best singers, and very few even of these, will be able to carry off an unaccompanied song with complete success. On the other hand, we feel strongly that art of this intimate and reflective character is far better suited to the drawing-room than to the concert-hall; thus we are not likely to have many opportunities for hearing ideal performances in an ideal setting. Nevertheless, I think that very satisfying results could be obtained by amateur singers at home if only they could rid themselves of the conventional idea of 'someone to play accompaniments,' and pluck up the courage to raise their voices unsupported. But their hesitation to do this—and they have my full sympathy!—will, I fancy, prove a slowly-moved barrier to the popularity of unaccompanied song.

Are not these difficulties a worthy challenge to composers, publishers, and singers, professional and amateur, to make of unaccompanied song a thing of art and not a kind of 'precious' freak?

Occasional Notes

Mr. Hamilton Harty's speech at the Manchester Luncheon Club on October 2 has called forth a good deal of strong comment. A reading of the speech in full seems, however, to show that the comments were based on a few widely-quoted sentences. Without their context these certainly sounded a highly provocative note. In fairness to Mr. Harty we print below the main body of his address, as reported in the *Manchester Guardian* of October 3:

He set himself to answer the question whether the English were a musical people. His answer was that they loved music as much as any nation, but did not always consider it worth their while to cultivate it in a proper way. One of the reasons for the decline since Elizabethan times, when music was a necessary part of the education of a gentleman, was, he thought, the curious unwillingness of the English people to believe in themselves. They were too ready still to believe that what came from abroad, bearing a foreign name, must of necessity be better music than we could produce ourselves. Twenty years' isolation from foreign influences would make a vast difference. Free Trade, whatever might be thought of it in commerce, was certainly not a good policy for English music until we ourselves had something to sell.

If the general public were to blame, our composers were still more guilty. We suffered from a lack of patriotism in music, but if composers would write really English music it would, he thought, help to awaken this patriotism. With few exceptions our composers had not learned the trick of saying really English things in English, instead of saying foreign things in broken French, German, and Russian. It seemed to him that since Purcell we had had only one really distinguished English composer—Sir Arthur Sullivan. He defined the qualities which constituted English music as sentiment and broad comedy, in alternate streaks—like bacon—soundness of workmanship, and a general kindly geniality, with no ostentation. Alluding to Sir Edward Elgar as the most distinguished English composer of the present day, he observed that his music was undoubtedly great, and because of its magnificent strength and nobility it would always live; yet Elgar's serious work appeared to him to be the music of a great religious mystic, and to lack the other qualities which he had suggested as necessary to the composer who would claim to be essentially English.

COMPOSERS WHO ARE TOO CLEVER

When he was reproached, Mr. Harty said, for not producing more music by our younger English composers he had to reply frankly that he considered most of it bad and insincere. He preferred to perform, rather than imitations, works by real French, German, Russian, or Italian composers. All these young composers of ours were full of cleverness and undoubtedly talented, but if he were asked by them for his advice he would say, 'Try not to be clever, but to feel something sincerely about your own country, and then write about it.' Mere cleverness in music was becoming so general that now it might almost be called a curse. It was better to write one sincere, simple English song like *Cherry Ripe* or *Sally in our Alley* than to write reams of symphonies and oratorios and operas that had nothing particular to do with English sentiment and English thought.

With much of this there will, we think, be general agreement. No one can listen to a great deal of new orchestral music without being conscious of a fatal defect in the composers' use of lavish instrumental resources as an end rather than a means. Of the novelties produced during the present 'Promenade' season, for example, how many have