

A Canadian Musician's 'Wanderjahr'

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A CANADIAN MUSICIAN'S
'WANDERJAHR.'

By A. S. VOGT.

Some American and Canadian Universities have established the excellent custom of granting 'Sabbatical' years to members of their various faculties, entitling the recipients to a twelve months' period of combined vacation and study in the Old Lands. It is a matter for regret that some such system is not available for members of the hard-worked musical profession. If musicians would enjoy the delightful and profitable experiences of such a *Wanderjahr*, they are, of necessity, compelled to exercise personal initiative, and assume the responsibility which such a proposition involves; but the profitable inspiration and pleasure resulting therefrom would seem to justify any reasonable sacrifice in order to realise them. At the kind suggestion of the Editor of the *Musical Times*, I shall endeavour to record some musical impressions formed during recent travels in various parts of the Continent and in England, confining myself more particularly to choral experiences in France, Austria, Germany, and the Motherland.

I may say in passing that the cultivation of music in Canada is, owing to our close proximity to the powerful and wealthy country to the south of us, affected to some extent by the same cosmopolitan influences which, in so short a period of time, have produced such excellent results in the large Eastern cities of the United States, notably in Boston and New York. In choral music our English extraction has been largely responsible for the remarkable activity which prevails in the city of Toronto in this branch of the art. We have a veritable plethora of choral Societies, all doing their share in inspiring a love of music in a singularly large portion of the city's population. In instrumental music, also, there is an equally active condition of affairs. The city possesses a number of strongly equipped music schools, one of which registered over 2,000 pupils last season. A permanent symphony orchestra and a number of chamber-music organizations combine to enhance the city's reputation as a music-loving and music-supporting community.

Leaving Canada in April last, it was my good fortune to be present at the International Festival held in Paris, in May, at which about 180 of the best choirs of the Continent and England competed. No better opportunity could have been afforded for studying certain choral conditions of the Old World than was presented on this occasion. It was soon made clear that French and British choral ideals were as far removed from each other as the Poles. In the principal competition for mixed-voice choirs, for instance, first honours were awarded a Belgian choir which, on account of fundamental tonal shortcomings and very faulty intonation, would in all probability hardly have been considered a serious factor in a competition presided over by a British board of adjudicators, or even by an International group of judges. The relative positions of the British prize-winning

choirs in this class would, apart from the foreign choirs, also doubtless have been changed had the adjudicating been done by English musicians. At the same time one was forced to the conclusion that the British choirs competing, whilst excelling in smoothness and roundness of tone, failed in certain interpretative qualities which the French judges evidently deemed absolutely essential to any performance aspiring to serious artistic recognition. Temperamentally, but more particularly in the subtler elements of rhythm and tonal colour, several of the foreign choirs achieved quite extraordinary results. Perhaps the most notable choral achievement of the Festival was the really superb singing of the Prague Société des Instituteurs-Chanteurs, a men's chorus which, more than any other I heard, seemed to reveal most exhilarating rhythmical abandon and nuancing, combined with an almost orchestral command of colour and a warm and in most cases pure quality of tone. Doubtless almost the entire success won by this remarkably effective body of singers was due to the powerful inspiration gained from their very gifted conductor. I felt convinced at the time that in his hands one or two of the resonant, rich-toned British choirs present would soon have developed a vital and convincing style quite equal to that revealed in the singing of the Bohemian choir under Professor Spilka. This choir I am hoping to hear again, in Prague, before returning to Canada.

The Vienna Music Festival of last June provided rare opportunities for hearing a number of the leading choral bodies of the Austrian capital, including the famous Wiener Männergesangverein and the very efficient mixed-voiced Imperial Society of Music Friends. Both organizations impressed me as combining good tonal resources with sound musicianship.

In Germany my most pleasant choral sensations thus far have been those experienced through the remarkably fine singing of the choirs of St. Thomas' Church, Leipzig, and the Dom Kirche, Berlin. Church music in Germany does not, generally speaking, reach a high standard. But the two choirs named are certainly amongst the finest of their kind in the world. The splendid singing of the exacting programme chosen by the Berlin Domchor for their Russian tour of October furnished a remarkable tribute to the artistic qualifications of their choirmaster, Professor Rüdel, a cultured musician whose choral activities include the training of the Bayreuth Festival chorus and the fine chorus of the Berlin Royal Opera. Some years ago, whilst on a visit to Germany, I was so fortunate as to hear the then touring Russian Imperial Choir, a famous body of singers remarkable more particularly for the phenomenal range and quality of its bass voices. Its repertoire much resembled that of the two representative German church choirs referred to. As my itinerary during the next few months includes St. Petersburg, I may then probably hear the Russian choir in some of its home concerts.

Those things which most impress one in a choral sense in travelling through England are the almost uniformly high vocal standard of its church choirs, the enthusiasm, endurance, and loyalty of its Festival choruses, and the inspiring spectacle presented by the multitudes attending such competitive events as the Blackpool Festival. The unusual technical efficiency and smoothness of tone displayed by the London choirs of St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Brompton Oratory, Westminster Cathedral, St. Margaret's, and others it has been my privilege to hear, bear eloquent testimony to what is being consistently demanded by England in its ecclesiastical music.

Birmingham Festival of October provided me with my first English Festival experience. Several things profoundly impressed me here—quite apart from the brilliant achievements of the very fine choir which the event called into existence, and the pronounced success won by Sir Edward Elgar in his new work 'We are the Music Makers.' These were the superb quality of the playing of the orchestra under Sir Henry Wood, and the undisputable triumph won by Professor Granville Bantock in the great orchestral novelty of the Festival, his orchestral drama, 'Fifine at the Fair.' One may safely predict that this work is destined to go the round of the great orchestras of the world. The choir appeared to me to be strongest in its altos and basses, the former in particular being most sympathetic and rich in tone-quality.

The sopranos, although quite effective, seemed hardly equal to those of several Yorkshire choirs I have heard, whilst the tenors appeared somewhat hard in tone and slightly throaty in production. To an outsider the official returns of the paid attendance at the Festival proved disappointing. It is possible that the great artistic development which is taking place in British music is doing much to render obsolete the old-time 'Festival,' the very name of which, under present-day musical conditions, quite wrongly suggests a prevailing state of musical starvation. Or may the comparative indifference of the public be ascribed to the rather too solemn general character of the choral music offered at most of these important events?

One of my most memorable musical experiences has been that provided by the recent Blackpool Competitive Festival. I came to England fully prepared for the unbounded enthusiasm and the abundance of talent which this democratic movement revealed on this occasion. The choral-singing was in many instances of a distinctively beautiful character. But even more remarkable seemed the almost sensational singing of some of the children in the solo competitions. When one considers that these and many of the competing choirs are recruited from the artisan classes, and that a number of the conductors are amateurs, the results achieved must be regarded as a triumphant demonstration of the frank love of music which prevails in the North of England and of the fine natural musical instincts of the people. Through these Festivals the most advanced type of choral composition is

being accorded a hearing, and our leading choral composers are being encouraged in some of their most daring vocal and harmonic experiments. One was deeply impressed with what was achieved under the circumstances with an almost impossible type of choral work by some of the competing organizations.

The committee responsible for the choice of suitable tests for the more significant competitions are clearly faced with most perplexing problems. Some of the really brilliant choirmasters whom this unique movement has 'discovered' doubtless welcome works of pronounced complexity, such as are calculated to call for the last ounce of concentration, whether as regards unanchored tonalities, vocal (or unvocal) difficulties, subtle interpretations, or exacting technical details. Yet it cannot be denied that one or two of the chosen tests made demands on musical sensibility, technique, imagination, and general responsiveness apparently quite beyond the range of even the finest competing choirs.

Following a cultivation of the superb unaccompanied choruses of Cornelius, Brahms, and others in former seasons, some of the works chosen for this year's competitions have doubtless seemed to many to be but a logical evolution. Others have felt that some of the test-pieces have clearly proven that the human voice has its limitations. The same may be said of the powers of musical comprehension of the competitors.

The competitions, however, through their artistic triumphs and their devotion to the highest ideals, have been the means of discovering and introducing to the English-speaking choral world some of the most distinctively beautiful and elevating *a cappella* compositions in the entire repertory of choral music. It would be difficult to estimate the beneficent influence of this significant and wholesome movement on the musical life of the nation; and it may be taken for granted that the same minds which have in the past been responsible for the welfare of these North of England Festivals will successfully grapple with new situations as they are created from time to time as the movement develops.

I cannot conclude this letter without gratefully acknowledging many delightful and unexpected courtesies extended to me by members of the profession and others since my arrival in England. Greatly interested as I have naturally been in what I was privileged to hear musically, nothing has more impressed me than the splendid virility, sincerity, and buoyant spirit of the *people* of England. Surely there is no occasion here for pessimism either as regards 'decadence of the race' or the artistic future of the nation.

[Dr. A. S. Vogt is the conductor of the famous Mendelssohn Choir of Toronto, established in 1894. He is now enjoying a Sabbatical year's holiday, and will return to Canada early in 1913. In a later issue we shall have more to say regarding Dr. Vogt and the splendid achievements of his Choir not only in Canada but in the United States.—ED. M. T.]