

Modern British Composers: VII. Lord Berners

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The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR

JANUARY 1 1920

MUSICAL TIMES PRIZES

The proprietors of the MUSICAL TIMES offer two prizes, of the value of Twenty-five Guineas each, for the best composition of—

- (1) An anthem for four voices: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, with organ accompaniment.
- (2) A part-song, without accompaniment, for four voices: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass.

The words chosen for setting should be either non-copyright, or the option of using them must have been secured by the composer.

No composition, when printed, should exceed in length eight pages of the MUSICAL TIMES, wherein the successful anthem and part-song will appear.

The copyright of the prize compositions will become the property of the prize-givers. The right to withhold the prizes is reserved if none of the compositions submitted attains a good standard. At the same time, the proprietors may negotiate for the purchase of the copyright of any unsuccessful work.

Competitors should keep in mind the average capacity of good choirs.

It will be an advantage if the words selected are unhackneyed, wide in their appeal, and of undoubted poetic merit.

The authorship of each composition must be indicated only by a motto or *nom-de-plume* written at the top of the manuscript; such motto or *nom-de-plume* must also be written outside a sealed envelope accompanying the composition and containing the name and address of the composer.

The awards will be made known in the April issue of this journal.

Compositions, which must be received not later than March 1, should be addressed to:

THE EDITOR OF THE MUSICAL TIMES,

160, Wardour Street, Soho,

London, W.-1,

and endorsed 'MUSICAL TIMES COMPETITION.'

B.

MODERN BRITISH COMPOSERS

BY EDWIN EVANS

VII.—LORD BERNERS

In the course of a lecture which he gave recently on 'Modern Tendencies in Music,' under the auspices of 'The Arts League of Service,' Mr. Eugène Goossens, jun., remarked that musical progress in England was exclusively the work of individuals, and that groups or schools did not play the part in it which they do on the Continent. It is a shrewd observation. There exist groups in England, and they are as clannish in their ideas, though perhaps not in their social intercourse, as any on the Continent; but they do not contribute to musical progress. Neither do they seriously impede it. Just as in an exhibition of paintings there will be found represented a number of artists whose province it seems to be to furnish collectively a background from which the work of individuals detaches itself, so we possess a multitude of composers who serve the purpose of maintaining a steady flow of music which only accentuates the achievements of outstanding personalities. A moment's reflection will show that the composers who group themselves readily in one's mind are invariably much less interesting than those who defy all such classifications. We have nothing in this country to correspond, for instance, with the Franckist group in Paris, in which a community of aims does not seem to lessen the prominence of its leading personalities. Still less have we any association on the lines of the six 'très jeunes,' of whom, so far, only Francis Poulenc appears to be known to English musicians. This is very encouraging. In the first place, the richness of our musical background indicates a wave of creative activity which will not spend itself in a generation. In the second place, the sharply-defined individualities which stand out from it point to a love of independence which will cause that activity to retain its significance.

The above is prefatory to saying that, as a composer, Lord Berners stands entirely alone. He not only represents a very special feature in our musical life, but he combines it with a paradox. He has a sense of humour which corresponds to a national trait, but the manner of its expression is international. It is English fun with a Latin pungency, and the blend is sometimes a little perplexing, for side by side with the direct humour in which we recognise something of our own contribution to the world's laughter, his works in this vein display a kind of tangential wit, at times ironic or even perverse, which is the product of his Continental associations. Probably he himself would sometimes experience a difficulty, if called upon to indicate the exact way in which his music is to be taken. There are some forms of humour which cannot be elucidated. One either catches

the whim or one does not. Most of Lord Berners's works are like that. They are destined to add to the gaiety of musical nations, but that will not prevent some from treating as mere distortion the harmonic assault upon their dignity. There is probably an even worse tribulation in store for him. He is not always in humorous mood. There is a vein of tenderness that occasionally comes to the surface. It has nothing in common with the form of sentimentality on which his irony frequently disports itself, but it exposes him to the fate which overtook one of our literary humorists who wrote a tragic story about a woman who was crushed by a python, and was told by his critics that he was not so funny as usual. I foresee that one of these days he will give vent to the kindly sympathy of which one is already conscious in some of his work, and be told that the point of his irony has become blunted.

It is not easy to describe the characteristic technical features of his music to the satisfaction of the theorist. In such matters hearing is believing. We may dismiss at once the contention that he does not invent melodies, for nobody has yet discovered a definition which covers the term. The conception of melody not only varies from generation to generation, but differs very strongly with the individual. The gift of melody has in fact been denied to every musician in turn who struck out a path for himself. Mr. Goossens claims that there are seventy real tunes employed in Lord Berners's 'Fantasie Espagnole.' It may be so. I have not counted them, and I regard their presence as irrelevant to the fact that the melodic interest is continuous. From that point of view, one of the most remarkable qualities of his writing is the absence of padding. The musical ideas may not all be of the same consequence, but their place is not taken by *remplissage*. His harmony is very personal. It is occasionally iconoclastic, but even then there is method in its madness, though the method would be less easy to describe than the madness. When he indulges in a harmonic distortion, it is done not only with good reason, but with great skill—yet such distortions are less frequent than instances of a whimsical inconsequence. Of his ability there can be no question. He works slowly and with great concentration. Even in the most disconcerting examples of superimposed harmonies, there is nothing that savours of arbitrariness. All is carefully pondered, if not calculated. It is a natural consequence of this close deliberation that so many passages in his music, whose aspect on paper is worse than incongruous, sound perfectly natural when performed, with their context, in the right medium.

Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt, Baron Berners, was born in 1883, and succeeded last year to the title, which is one of the oldest in the Peerage, dating from 1455. He received his first musical education at Dresden, and afterwards had lessons from a well-known English professor. He has become a little weary of the playful remark which appeared

in one of his earliest biographical notices, attributing to this experience the qualifications which have served him in the Diplomatic Service, but though too often quoted, the jest is good enough to be perpetuated. No doubt he had ample opportunities for learning the value of compromise, and it is reassuring to be told that he has found the knowledge of some value in the performance of his official duties, for he has certainly made no use of it in his compositions. He also studied for a time at Vienna, and when he was appointed in 1912 to our Embassy at Rome, he worked fitfully with Alfredo Casella. He numbers among his intimate friends Igor Stravinsky, from whom he has doubtless had valuable advice, but although his writing has points of affinity with that of Stravinsky, Casella, and some other modern composers such as Prokofiev, it would be an exaggeration to speak of influence. There is a tendency in modern music to which a number of gifted composers give a certain measure of allegiance, but as its first tenet is precisely the free deployment of individuality, it involves no common method and results in no such resemblances as are commonly met with among followers of a school. The principal analogy is that which causes Mr. Goossens in the article quoted above to describe him as 'a very hot-gospeller of modernism,' an alarming term which in reality means no more than that he is a contemporary and not an ancestor.

As will be seen by the accompanying list, his works are not numerous, and all of them are either published or in the press, with the exception of 'Three Songs in the German manner,' which presumably will see the light one of these days. The origin of these songs is interesting. On reading one of the many biographies of Heine, Lord Berners made the discovery that the poem, 'Du bist wie eine Blume,' which Schumann and other German composers have made famous as a love song, was in reality addressed to a fat white pig. He has accordingly deemed it a pious duty to restore the poet's original meaning, whilst preserving the sentimental character of the German *lied*.

His first published composition consisted of 'Three Little Funeral Marches,' respectively for a Statesman, a Canary, and a Rich Aunt. Though written in Lord Berners's personal idiom, they are scarcely as characteristic of it as the works which followed, and the humour of the first and third of them is more dependent upon association. They are clever examples of the grotesque in music, but the listener needs to be told of the depressing solemnity of a state funeral on a rainy day and of the improvement in the nephew's material outlook on life, in order to appreciate the joke, whereas some of Lord Berners's later works are intrinsically humorous in their music. On the other hand, the little elegy for a pet canary has a touch of wistful sentiment which makes it a miniature tone-poem. If there be irony in it, we prefer to ignore it and hear only its poetry:

'FOR A CANARY.'



'FOR A RICH AUNT.'



These early compositions were issued under the name of Gerald Tyrwhitt. The next in order of publication was entitled 'Fragments Psychologiques,' and consisted of three short pieces: 'Hatred,' 'Laughter,' and 'A Sigh.' In the actual writing of these fragments there is much more of Lord Berners as we know him to-day than there was in the 'Funeral Marches,' and yet their outlook is not completely characteristic, except perhaps in 'Laughter.' Here we find a passage that is typical of many, an apparently illogical sweep of inconsequent notes, difficult to justify on any grounds other than that it has exactly the effect which its author intended:



It is not realistic. It bears no relation for instance to Moussorgsky's much quoted but somewhat discreet notation of laughter, for the simple reason that it is concerned not with the sound but with the motive of laughter. Instead of reproducing the effect itself it provides an analogous cause from which the effect results. At the same

time the device itself is as elastic as the idiom to whose vocabulary it belongs. It is capable of other applications, just as in ordinary speech words of identical etymology can be made to carry essentially different meanings. In 'Le Poisson d'Or,' for instance, which spurred Mr. Ernest Newman to creative effort in the columns of the *Observer*, there occurs the following:



which belongs to the same family of ideas, but is made to do duty for other associations. In all this there is an appositeness that is equally hard to describe or to explain. It is like certain forms of wit in that it sounds better than it looks on paper. But there has been so much music of which the opposite is true!

'Le Poisson d'Or' is really the earliest of Lord Berners's pianoforte compositions, although it appeared third in print. It is dedicated to Igor Stravinsky, and purports to comment upon a story of a sentimentally inclined goldfish, consumed with longing for a mate as bright as a sovereign, in place of whom he is given a mere prosaic breadcrumb which he swallows without interest. The music is slight, but interesting chiefly because of some deftly contrived figures which the well-disposed may regard as cleverly descriptive, but which in any case have a fascinating sound. The publishers of this piece embarked upon a new policy by securing a pictorial cover and other decorations from no less an artist than Madame Natalie Gontcharova, who is known in England chiefly by her brilliant staging of 'Le Coq d'Or.' Similarly, the work which was next to appear in print is decked in ambitious designs by M. Michel Larionov, whose work we have learned to appreciate in the ballet 'Children's Tales.'

This work consists of three pieces for orchestra which were introduced in the provinces under the conductorship of Mr. Eugène Goossens, jun., and at the Alhambra Theatre in London under that of M. Ernest Ansermet. Here we begin to be concerned not only with more ambitious achievements, but with music that realises more closely Lord Berners's vision of his own aims. The three pieces, 'Chinoiserie,' 'Valse Sentimentale,' and 'Kazatchok,' are, both in technique and in expressiveness, a great advance upon all that went before. The composer has gained assurance in the handling of his medium. It has become a more obedient servant—at least, that is the impression it makes after the first exhilaration of hearing such music has passed. The pungency of the style may be judged from the following:

Ex. 4.

(a) 'CHINOISERIE.'

Sva.

8va.

8va.

8va.

(b) 'Valse Sentimentale.'

pp dolcissimo.

pp

The second of these examples shows a more amplified harmonization of the combined themes which open the 'Valse Sentimentale.' It will be noted how one of these endeavours, in accordance with convention, to appeal to our feelings, whilst the other indulges in ironic asides which betray a truer worldliness. The contrast is of a kind that Lord Berners loves to make. Sometimes he even likes to leave us in doubt as to which is the side for which he invites our sympathetic assent. But here at least there is no doubt. The waltz is a clever parody of a well-established tradition, and a theatre audience was not slow to appreciate its humour. It is not impossible that an audience more conscious of its musical proclivities would have needed correspondingly longer.

These three pieces, which are published in the form of duets for pianoforte (four hands), contain within themselves the starting point of the two works which followed. In the 'Valse Bourgeoise' the composer develops ideas similar to those of the 'Valse Sentimentale,' which, it is not irrelevant to note, is dedicated to Mr. Eugène Goossens, jun., also a composer with a sense of humour. The 'Kazatchok,' on the other hand, points its fun at the purveyors of local colour of all climes, and may therefore well be the parent notion from which sprang afterwards the 'Fantaisie Espagnole,' though the irony is in this case less obvious.

The 'Valse Bourgeoise' are three in number. The first is a 'Valse Brillante,' in which occurs the following :

Ex. 5.

cres. *f*

8va.

poco rit.

Stravinsky hails the last four bars of the above example as one of the most 'impertinent' passages in modern music. It is more than likely that this opinion will be echoed by many a reader of this article, if not with the same inflection. It is all a matter of point of view. Mr. Newman regards Lord Berners as the gamin in English music, but I fancy his tongue is more often in his cheek than protruding. Either way, he has his full share of original sin.

The second number is a 'Valse Caprice'; the third is entitled 'Strauss, Strauss et Strauss.' Here there are frank and recognisable deformations, to one of which is appended the remark 'Mais je connais ça.' The fun is broader, and

could scarcely be missed by the dullest pedant, but it is perhaps somewhat less of an achievement to caricature Johann, Richard, and Oscar than to satirise a generic type of composition which delighted entire generations of drawing-room amateurs. In the corresponding music of to-day it would be far easier to pen an acceptable caricature of some popular waltz-king than it would be to ridicule in one piece the whole cult of the *Valse lente*.

The 'Fantaisie Espagnole' is at present Lord Berners's most important work. There is probably no country which has suffered so severely from the manufacturers of spurious local colour as Spain. Nearly every composer, great or little, has at some time or other tried his hand at evoking the Spanish atmosphere by means of devices, chiefly rhythmic, which have been so completely conventionalised that no Spanish peasant would recognise them as part of his national idiom. It is only in recent years that even in Spain itself composers have been found with sufficient initiative to brush aside all this lumber and get down to facts. Even the French composers whose tone-pictures of Spain carry conviction give us the fleeting impression of cultured travellers rather than sympathetic interpretations. Meanwhile the average Spaniard, like the average Englishman, is far more familiar with the music of the cosmopolitan music-hall than with that of his own tradition. 'This confusion of ideas between the real and the false Spain has its humorous side which Lord Berners has been the first to discover. He does not profess to know Spain except through these various musical portrayals, the common features of which he has exaggerated in a spirit of raillery which is not in the least unfriendly. The spirit of such a composition demands that the effects should be piled up in ironical profusion, with a degree of technical extravagance that underlines their cumulative humour. Occasionally, may be, it is underlined somewhat heavily, but happily not to an extent which would remove all doubt whether this composition is to be taken seriously or humorously, for it is in that doubt that resides a great deal of the wit expressed. We are not sure that Lord Berners is laughing all the time, and, when he is, we are uncertain whether he is laughing at us for taking him seriously, at his brother composers, or at himself. There is not enough of the grotesque to make the music a caricature, but the local colour is over-accentuated to a point which approaches at times to the burlesque, without, however, leaping the frontier. As music, it is somewhat tantalising: as a contribution to the perennial controversy in which the subject of folk-music is enveloped, it is invaluable.'*

The 'Fantaisie' consists of a Prelude, Fandango, and March, the whole occupying about ten minutes.

I am not at liberty to describe the work upon which Lord Berners is now engaged, but it is one

which provides free play to his wit besides some temptations to extravagance—if he should feel that way inclined.

A point which has considerable bearing upon the direction he is likely to take is that his irony is always characterised by unfailing good temper. It is, perhaps, this which most clearly distinguishes it from the irony of our Gallic neighbours, which is more often spiteful. It is really very amiable leg-pulling, and the salt of satire is most carefully kept away from anything resembling a wound. Above all, it is never rubbed in. At the same time, it is accompanied by so much fancifulness, that in other days than the present Lord Berners's humour might not improbably have taken a more romantic channel. I am not aware whether he is a lineal descendant of that Lord Berners of the 16th century who gave us the English version of 'Huon of Bordeaux,' which was our first introduction to the realm of King Oberon, but if he is, his family history is repeating itself, for, if King Oberon were real to us to-day, he would almost certainly be a humorist. It would be his only chance of defending his kingdom against the onslaught of the Philistines.

LIST OF COMPOSITIONS

1. Trois petites marches funèbres ... 1914. Spring.
2. Fragments psychologiques ... 1915. Autumn.
3. Poisson d'or ... 1914.
4. Three songs in the German manner ... 1913.
5. Three Pieces for Orchestra ... 1916. January.
Chinoiserie.
Valse sentimentale.
Kazatchok.
6. Valses Bourgeoises ... 1917.
7. Fantaisie Espagnole ... 1918-19.
(Finished May, 1919.)

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ASPECTS OF DVORÁK'S CHAMBER MUSIC

By H. C. COLLES

The visit in the summer of the Czechoslovak musicians to London, and the subsequent reappearance here of the Bohemian Quartet in the autumn, have brought Dvorák once more directly into our line of vision, and made it pertinent to ask whether he is a neglected or an over-rated composer. The warm welcome which he and his music received here in his lifetime has given him a name which lasts, yet in almost every department he is known by one or two works only. Speak to any amateur of music about his five published Symphonies and you are almost sure to get some reply about the beauty of 'From the New World.' Suggest to a professional string quartet that a work by Dvorák would be welcome in their programme, and Op. 96 in F, popularly called the 'Nigger,' is almost certain to make its appearance. But there are eight String Quartets published by Simrock, and most of them, before the war at any rate, were available in

* E.E. in *The Outlook*, October 25, 1919