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MUSIC CHRONICLE

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MUSIC CHRONICLE

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'THIS FESTIVAL […] is an attempt to display as fully as could be the musical activity of Oxford in its many and varies forms.' The attempt was nothing if not praiseworthy, and a small group of individuals genuinely exerted themselves to make a success of it. But it was very moderate. Everything was smoothly and efficiently managed, and there were, it is true, isolated moments which seemed to justify all the labour and publicity which was spent on it. But there were other moments, moments which made one wonder whether it was necessary to hold a festival, whether there were not aspects of artistic life in the city which it were better not to show to the world, even though to condemn them outright would perhaps be unfair and ungenerous.

There are several causes, of which it is useless to enumerate the unremovable, why the success of the Festival, and of our local music generally, is never more than mediocre. But the reason which touches us most deeply, because the responsibility is not difficult to fix, is the obvious stolidity and unresponsiveness of the musical masses; either the lack of musical education, or of enthusiasm, or of knowledge of what is happening in the outer musical world – or some or all of these – contribute to make every composition and performance for which Oxford is responsible tepid and provincial. One is even allowed to complain when this happens at Birmingham or Liverpool; but what is one to say about cultured apathy in Oxford? Wild extravagance is better, is more civilised, than this torpor. For it is quite clear, and everyone in theory agrees, that the arts must either live intensely or quickly commit suicide; but to drag on a minor existence is worse **[617]** than extinction, is to become a travesty. This indictment is vague, and certainly exaggerated. It is the former because here to specify is invidious, and the latter in order to draw attention to itself; it is exaggerated, but surely in the right direction. It may be understood by those at whom it is directed, or it may not. In either case no more can be done.

To come to detail. The orchestral beginning of the Festival was marked by a concert conducted by Mr Guy Warrack, whose musicians played harshly and not in concord with each other; they became increasingly undisciplined, and Tchaikovsky's Fifth

Symphony sounded loose, loud, and terrible; it was never a great work, though it almost passed off as one under Nikisch, who was strangely fond of what he called its Eurasianism; but on 5 May it was grandly maltreated.

On the other hand, 'Solomon' was wholly delightful. Perhaps the English tradition of Handel worship is still alive in the hearts of the Oxford Bach Choir, of Miss Isobel Baillie, Miss Mabel Ritchie and Miss Margaret Balfour (soloists). Of Messrs Dykes Bower and Christopher Cowan (continuo and organ) and of Dr W. H. Harris, who conducted. For they all applied themselves to their tasks with an ardour which sometimes rose to enthusiasm; but it is quite dead in Mr Steuart Wilson, who seemed to sing without pleasure, so that many of the peculiar little tags and conceits of Handel and his contemporaries, which it is possible to think delightful and look on with genuine affection, in his rendering were made stiff and ridiculous; it is not difficult to do this, but requires great heartlessness in the doer. However, the performance treated as a whole was one of the best events of the Festival, and Dr Harris earns our gratitude and admiration.

The Bach Concert was more ambitious **[618]** and the performance correspondingly poorer. The Oxford Orchestral Society under Mr Reginald Jacques played competently, but the Oxford Harmonic Society sang with far more vigour than skill, and in the motet 'Come, Come, O Jesu, Come', became patchy and scrappy, and (the comparison is not gratuitous) resembled the LMS Clearing House Choir in one of its unbridled performances. Mr Tucker, pianist in the D Minor Concerto, played with excessive modesty and restraint for that full-blooded work, but with enviable skill, and not without feeling. Miss Silk has a thin silvery voice, justly famous for its purity and undoubted religious emotion; her understanding of her art far outruns the quality of her voice; but it has a frail nobility of its own, for all its pious mannerisms. It was not a very satisfactory concert, but it is essentially right that this homage should have been paid to Bach, however inadequate the means.

What are we to say of the concert which followed the next day, and which consisted of chamber music arranged by the Oxford University Musical Club and Union? The works performed were by Ernest Walker, by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, by Arnold Bax, by J. A. Sykes, by Bernard Naylor, by Herbert Murrill and by W. A.

Mozart. Of the Oxford composers Dr Ernest Walker was by far the most modern and sophisticated: his Violincello Sonata is an intricate, reflective, interesting work, in places even inspired, not by genius but by a quality difficult to describe, a kind of intelligent artistry, an acquired talent for making music, faintly academic perhaps, but never dull and never shallow.

We waited for what was to follow with considerable impatience. Was there or was there not talent or even genius among our contemporaries? It is peculiarly sad that the absence of it which this **[619]** concert demonstrated should have taken the form that it did. Neither Mr Sykes nor Mr Naylor showed any immaturity or any of the extravagances or other faults of youth. The work of both was perfectly grown, that of Mr Naylor even senile. The Rhapsody for Flute and Pianoforte by Mr Sykes was agreeable, and had an honest, straightforward style. Mr Naylor's Rhapsody for Viola and Pianoforte is a wonderfully anaemic work, and seemed all the more so for continual self-conscious attempts to inject vigour into it by artificial means. It is very dull, but, again, it is not raw or callow. It is quite competent, even if loose, in form. But there is, so to speak, nothing positive in it, only a thin, greyish ghost of matter impotently diffused through it, incapable of rousing interest. Neither did it gain by following Bax's beautiful and brilliant 'Moy Mell'. Mr Murrill's songs are swift, funny, lively little things, which, even if slight in texture, ran gaily and sprightlily, to everyone's evident enjoyment. Once the lethargy was lifted, was audience was prepared to listen to the Mozart Clarinet Quintet in A Major, the most excellent performance of the entire Festival.

Then, on the next day, came the Mass in D. It is very difficult to pass fair criticism on the performance. It would be strange, and even miraculous, if a choir of amateurs were equal to the task; it is monstrously difficult to sing, and the choir did convey the greatness of it more faithfully than could be expected; while Sir Hugh Allen is surely the best choral conductor in the land. Our grievance is of a different kind altogether. It seemed to us that the work was radically misunderstood; it is obviously a proud and even violent work, petulant, not plaintive, at times almost angry and threatening; and this is indeed the mood which would expect from a man who was known **[620]** to treat his God with great intimacy, to speak plainly to Him and even upbraid Him stormily, whenever

he was moved by the injustices of the world. But instead of being treated as a work of enormous, almost sacrilegious, audacity, it was sung as though it were a work of gentle Catholic humility, a tranquil mass by Palestrina, or a tender, plaintive supplication by Bach, or by Mozart. Even so, the 'Credo', which not only defies description, but which even memory cannot conjure up, which can only be heard and leave the mind unsettled and comfortless, and cure it only by being heard again – this 'Credo' emerged triumphantly even though it was only half understood. After that one was anyhow in no mood for cavilling, though 'The Banks of Green Willow', which was then performed, tried all our patiences.

But the peculiar triumph of the Festival lay not in its orchestral nor in its choral works, but in its opera. If Dr Vaughan Williams in *Sir John in Love* does not rise to the heights of genius, he gets as near it as a man of talent can, for it is an excellent, almost flawless, work. The music seems to grow with and out of the words themselves, which seemed not set to it, but to have generated it, and to blend with it into a genuine, interpervasive whole. It is as if the composer had somehow succeeded in penetrating through the comedy to the springs and background of Shakespeare's inspiration, and assimilated himself to them with rare felicity, so that he stands to his material as Schumann stood to Heine's songs, or as Mendelssohn or Wolf sometimes stood to them; and this community of course makes the music now run gaily, and now move with dignity, with folk song and original invention so interwoven and integrated that the texture seems spontaneously created, homogeneous, somehow simultaneously both artificial and unartificial, and **[621]** uniquely fitting to its theme and words, far more so than anything in Wagner, but rather as in Rimsky-Korsakov, in *Le coq d'or* or in *Sadko*. The fun, as there, is at once rich and pointed, but it is peculiarly English, in excellently graceful and fresh fashion, filled with solid but winged substance. We do not know whether these dense clusters of epithets can convey any impression of the delights of this opera; it is a poor way of showing appreciation, but we can do no more. This triumphant end of the Festival obscured many weaknesses; later it only served to reveal them in greater detail.

After this we settled down to our normal, unexciting fare as provided by the Music Club. There were two evenings at least on which the quality of performance sank below the normal, and was

frighteningly bad; but otherwise, though the programmes were more uneventful than usual, the performances were very competent, especially that of the Brosa Quartet, and there was one strange night when the Marie Wilson Quartet made a fierce onslaught on some Brahms, and galloped through it with strange sound and fury, completely ignoring the composer's indications of slower tempi, which was very bewildering, and still seems unreasonable. But this was the only lapse from the humdrum. Meanwhile a nobler excitement was aroused by the visit of three virtuosi, all women, and all remarkable.

To praise Mme Landowska is almost effrontery; had there been no harpsichord it would have had to be invented for her to play on, because she plays for it rather than on it, and in doing so reveals what ought to be meant when 'fine art' is spoken of. Everyone knows that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced enchanting music, but not everyone knows [622] what is signified; when one remembers Mme Landowska and her Scarlatti or her Rameau, one can only wonder why most epithets here suddenly turn banal.

The same, but more curiously and interestingly, is shown by Mlle Jelly D'Aranyi. She is a distinguished and serious artist, but essentially a virtuoso, in so far as she loves the instrument more deeply than the composer, and looks at everything with its eyes; her hand must feel definite physical pleasure when it embarks on long adventures in the slender and intricate cadenzas and finally emerges on to the broad, smooth surface of the slow theme. The great composer-virtuosi of the eighteenth century had this same passionate love for their instrument, to the exclusion of almost everything else, and the same tendency to regard music as primarily a divine means of enhancing its glory and their pleasure. Like them, she is a willing slave to her instrument. Hence the singular sympathy with which she renders their masterpieces; Vitali's Ciaconna could not have been better played than it was by her one evening in Balliol, nor yet Stravinsky's suite on the themes of Pergolesi, nor de Falla, who among the moderns most closely approaches that attractive ideal, all played on that same evening.

But this attitude is sometimes fatal; the *Kreutzer Sonata* was, on another occasion, in the Town Hall, played by her with such fire and brilliance that its depth, its complexity, its shadows, the part played in it by uneasy thought was obliterated, and the whole was

made altogether too physical and too obvious. Her performance of the Bach Concerto in E Minor, for example, was a delight to hear, because she took pleasure in revealing the splendour and boldness of the work, but the remote and translucent quality of its slow movement had vanished completely; **[623]** it still was slow and beautiful, but it had become rich and solid and lost portions of its essence in the transmutation. Everything Mlle D'Aranyi touches she turns into the purest gold (in Brahms she is magnificent), but there are nobler elements than gold, to which those alone whom their love of an instrument leaves free to look beyond it can ever attain. Which brings us to the difference between her and Myra Hess.

Miss Hess has achieved a kind of freedom; she can afford to forget her piano, and totally immerse herself in what she is playing; she never, under any circumstances, consciously interprets herself, only the composer. With a singular lack of egoism she succeeds in forgetting herself, and allowing us to forget her too, which Mlle D'Aranyi never does, and indeed cannot do; with the latter, one is continually made aware of difficulties triumphantly surmounted, of favourite patches in the texture of her music to which she eagerly hastens, and communicates to you the vast thrill which it gives her to linger over them with open, enthusiastic partiality. This is not mere technique, but genuine artistry, virtuosity of the best and highest order. But with the former, if difficulties are surmounted, they are not allowed to be felt as such, and there is no bias and no intrusion of her person; there is a real attempt to resurrect the original emotion of the composer with a faithfulness and a single purpose to interpret, which shuts out all other desires, so that while it is being fulfilled, she does not attempt to evaluate her own material, to treat some parts as better and others as worse, but strives only to reveal the progress of a single experience, by somehow entering it and becoming herself the subject of it, with no thought of its objectness, of how it may look to those outside. The greatest, and in one **[624]** sense the only, real exponent of this way of playing is Artur Schnabel; there are many who realise that from him they heard Beethoven for the first time. No one at all can properly be compared to him; but if it were possible to do it for anyone, one would gladly do it for Miss Myra Hess.

We cannot end these already unwieldy notes without some reference to the Opera Club. It began in really noble fashion. The

courage, imagination and musical intelligence which the choice of Monteverdi's *Poppaea* showed still fills us with admiration for the founders. But then inspiration seemed to leave it. One could not complain of the choice of *Der Freischütz*; one might be bored by it, and think that Weber had no more life in him, but it is the earliest romantic opera, and it is a classic, and it contains undoubted genius. The *Bartered Bride* which followed was in more dubious taste; Smetana had not a spark of genius, and the opera does not disprove this; but it was very agreeable to listen to, and possibly the origins of openly nationalistic music in Europe ought to be interesting; besides which the Opera Club, after living in the company of giants, might with some justification plead that it was weary, and wanted something light and comic as a relief. By this time *Poppaea* and the ideals which that seemed to point to had been well-nigh lost sight of. Still, the Opera Club had so far shown itself a friend to music, and one wondered what would come next.

The possibilities were wide and alluring. If the committee boggled at Handel, there was Cimarosa's wonderful *Secret Marriage* for their choosing, or the great operas of Gluck; there was Schumann's charming *Genoveva* or Hugo Wolf's *Der Corregidor*, which was admitted to be a work of genius and had rarely been performed; or if something gayer was demanded, there are the delightful fantastic operas of **[625]** Rimsky-Korsakov; or, as seemed likely, something modern would be chosen, since everyone with any pretentions to taste was obviously eager to hear works about which Germany has been talking so long and so excitedly; there was Hindemith's *Cardillac*, or Berg's strange *Wozzek*, or Kodaly's excellently witty *Háry János*, the suite of which has often been heard in England. The Opera Club does not depend on the support of unlettered masses; it can afford to ignore stageability and to set up some sort of purely musical standard. We wondered, not with a certain amount of misgiving, what it would select, hoping that one of the above works would fire some influential imagination. Its choice was in due time announced; it fell on Albert Lortzing.

At least now one knows what that standard is, and what one may expect in the future. For if Lortzing, then why not Flotow and Nicolai and Suppé and Herold and Millöcker? There is no end to the number of ninth- and tenth- and eleventh-rate German composers of the last century whom a scrupulous historian would

be obliged to enumerate. They are, it is true, mostly dead and done with in their own native land; it has fallen to the lot of the Oxford University Opera Club to bring them to life again. All the bottomless vulgarity of Meyerbeer is preferable, because he has some real vigour and power of invention, or there is Donizetti, whose *Don Pasquale* is delightful, or Auber, to whom Wagner conceded originality, or Offenbach, who is sometimes very funny. And these are dead enough. But Lortzing!

The best that his champion, Mr Naylor, who will soon conduct his opera, has to say for it is that it is a bracing musical comedy. It is not bracing, but it is a comedy, and of the quality of its music the less said the better; it is in point of wit inferior to Sullivan, **[626]** its nature is perhaps better explained if we think of the works of Sir Edward German. Those who like the music of *Tom Jones* will like this farce too. It is perhaps true that they constitute the majority of the patrons of opera, and Lortzing is quite innocuous and easy to understand; he is quite regularly played in Prussian opera houses, to relieve the overworked companies after the long strain of Mozart, or Verdi, or Wagner; in England *Peter the Shipwright* was performed sometime in the middle of the last century, had its mild success, and was forgotten. It is all singularly watery, and far too characterless to be anything but genteel, though a great comic actor might cause amusement even there. It is completely antiquated, more so than Weber, because it was written for the taste of the day by a man of meagre talent, who created nothing of permanent value (and indeed never pretended that he did), and whose name and works survived largely through a sentimental affection in which he, the primitive of musical comedy, is held by the less critical among his countrywomen. There is really no point in spending so much time on Lortzing; optimists will say, quite rightly, that the music is merry enough, and will go down quite well, even though the plot, which, in the case of music such as this, does matter, is singularly clumsy. We emphasise that though we are forced to condemn, we still cannot understand how the Opera Club, which certainly used to possess self-respect, came to this decision. It can be only a momentary lapse; it may remember the truly noble manner in which its foundations were laid, and be saved yet. We pray it may be so, and that this incident will come to be regarded as a curious

misunderstanding. For we can conceive of no reasonable explanation.

We should like to apologise for the desultoriness, **[627]** incompleteness and lack of continuity of this chronicle; but musical activity in our University occurs piecemeal, and no survey of it can help reflecting this; we have at least tried to concentrate on the more significant fragments.

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