



MUSIC CHRONICLE

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It is very pleasant to be able to give wholehearted praise, and, generally, pleasant to receive it; the former is the agreeable task which we find ourselves able to perform with regard to the Opera Club, whose choice of the opera to be produced next term is so wise and discriminating and altogether happy that we can only offer its authors our unqualified admiration. The opera selected is *A Night in May* by Rimsky-Korsakov, a generous and delicate work, full of the folklore of pagan Russia, with which Christian elements are quaintly interspersed; it closely follows the story which it dramatises, one of a cycle of Ukrainian tales by Nicholas Gogol, which are collectively called *Evenings at a Farmhouse near the Dikanka*.

The story is one of the most beautiful and poetically conceived in the language, and gave the composer an opportunity for indulging his growing fondness of picturesque paganism, as well as of paying homage to his beloved Gogol. When the opera was produced in 1880, Mussorgsky thought little of it, and César Cui reviewed it very coldly. But it survived its detractors, was recognised for a work of fine art, was performed in Germany, and finally reached London in 1914, when Diaghilev produced it at Covent Garden, with considerable cuts, which were evidently necessary. This is no place in which to discuss the quality of Rimsky-Korsakov's music (more especially as an essay devoted to this composer (a review by a more competent hand than ours will probably appear in the next issue of this journal), but we cannot refrain from affirming our belief that he was a composer of magnificent genius, and wrote the most perfect operas of his time. We hope that all those who claim to be concerned for music will realise that this imposes on them the [132] duty of doing everything in their power to ensure the success of this excellent and original enterprise.

With these pleasant sentiments we may leave the Opera Club and turn to our recent past. The general background of last term's music was furnished by concerts in the Holywell Room and at Balliol, which preserved a level of solid goodness, or at least agreeableness. The high-water mark of the former was reached in the singing of Marietta and Martha Amstad and the playing of

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Alice Ehlers; the last, especially, played the harpsichord with wonderful skill and feeling; nothing like it had been heard since the now distant visit of Mme. Landowska. The most notable event at Balliol was Medtner's recital; but of this hereafter.

A pleasant concert was given by the Oxford Symphony Orchestra under Sir Richard Terry, Sir Hugh Allen and Mr Crawford McNair. The proceedings had a delightful village concert atmosphere about them; enthusiasm and amateurishness both ran high, and emerged with particular force in the fine, loud performance of Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Claviers and Orchestra, which was played in a manner which would have stirred the morosest spirit to active sympathy. A more notable achievement was the noble performance of the St Matthew Passion by the Oxford Bach Choir under Dr Harris. It was greatly improved since last summer, and does genuine honour to Oxford and to its conductor. But we hasten to the more unusual events of the term. These are the concerts given by Mr Anthony Bernard, by Medtner, and by the New Music Oxford Choir.

Mr Bernard conducted the London Chamber Orchestra in a curious potpourri of eighteenth-century and contemporary music. Fauré's overture to *Masques et Bergamasques*, with which it opened, is a charming [133] piece of delicate, ephemeral music-making which is frequently played in France, where composers seem to have given themselves up to just such stylish trifling, with Vincent D'Indy as an almost solitary figure surviving from a nobler age. After this Bach's Fourth Brandenburg Concerto in G was played. It is, we maintain, fair to complain of Mr Bernard's performance that it was too faithful to the style of the eighteenth century; Mr Bernard conducted as one might conduct Rameau or Grétry, and within those limits conducted excellently; what we wish to urge is that since Bach has come to mean more to us than ever he meant to the men of his own day, he must be regarded in the light of the developments to which he led, of what took place long after his death, of all the implications of his music which our own age is so busy articulating. This, after all, is what interpreting means, to those, at any rate, who believe that works of art grow and reveal themselves in time. But on a static conception – and it is perfectly tenable – Mr Bernard's interpretation was more than justified; the concerto was played with great tact and sensibility, and one could almost see a roll of music for a baton in the conductor's elegantly

moving hand; only the effect was perhaps, at times, a trifle bloodless.

This, too, was the occasion on which Oxford was introduced to Respighi's *Trittico Batticelliano*, and gained little thereby. Respighi was, it is true, taught by Rimsky-Korsakov, but he evidently remained impervious to the master's delicacy of feeling; for he shows none. He was given the palette to hold, and has laid on the paints in dense and glaring layers; the result is a piece of copious and singularly ineffective rhetoric, which is undoubtedly alive, but with a clumsy and coarse exuberance of its own, which vainly seeks to claim kinship with the [134] most tender and sensitive among the great painters. Lambert's *Pomona*, which followed, was, at any rate, in better taste; it is agreeable, has wit, and is as unsubstantial as a piece of Poulenc. The programme ended with Peter Warlock and Josef Haydn. It was an interesting and stimulating concert.

The visit of Nicholas Medtner, who played his own works for the piano at Balliol, was an event of real importance. He is a composer who possesses authentic lyrical genius, who draws from the wells of Brahms and Grieg and Rubinstein, but never apes them, nor anyone else. Nothing so lovely and so full of individual character as his fairy tales has been written for the piano in this century, if we except Scriabin and the Spaniards. Medtner, with all his national qualities, is considerably more European and in line with the great tradition than de Falla, but they have in common an expressiveness, a power of immediate lyrical appeal, which makes them together the two purest, most romantic voices of our times.

The palm of originality goes to the New Music Oxford Choir, which, meeting at Lady Margaret Hall on a certain afternoon in March, ventured to give not only two performances of Krenek's *Die Fabreszeiten*, which proved to be a mediocre work, delicate and imaginative in places, but hardly even doing justice to Hölderlin's noble words, but in addition – and this is what is so astonishingly bold – *Der Lindberghflug* by Kurt Weill. This cantata, written for broadcasting by a young German composer, tells the story of the heroic enterprise in dramatic dialogue between the actors and witnesses of the event, sung to music which is partly 'pure', as, for example, in the aria sung by Sleep, and partly frankly imitative, as when the Engine speaks. The young gentlemen and ladies of the chorus – or at least some among them – made no [135] attempt to

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conceal their amusement at the strange effects which Miss Francesca Allinson inspired them to produce, though the soloists – Lindbergh himself, baritone (representing in order the New York Wireless Station, Sleep, the American Newspapers, First Fisherman: a pronouncer on the unattainable) and bass (Second Fisherman: also a pronouncer on the unattainable) – sang their parts with wholly admirable gravity, and Mr Ian Glennie, who sang the hero's part, recited Lindbergh's thoughts (spoken passages with orchestra) with force and dignity, which, in view of the kind of words provided for him by their author, Bert Brecht, or perhaps by the translator, is a remarkable enough achievement. The effect of the work is that of a fantastic stunt, which leaves the hearer dubious and wondering whether a second hearing would convince him that here is something better than a mere provoking bizarrerie which sounds comic when earnestly intended, and whether Hindemithian tactics have not here been driven to a ludicrous *reductio ad absurdum*. He is left wondering these things, but if he is wise he will not decide until he has achieved closer acquaintance with the school and its methods.

Meanwhile we must pay a tribute of respect to Miss Allinson and her coadjutor for conceiving and bringing to fruition this bold experiment, which, whether it achieved success or not, revealed a musical aliveness and a fine independence of public opinion which, when genuine, is valuable in itself, even if it is manifested in some extravaganza perpetrated solely *pour épater les bourgeois*.

A. A. A.

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