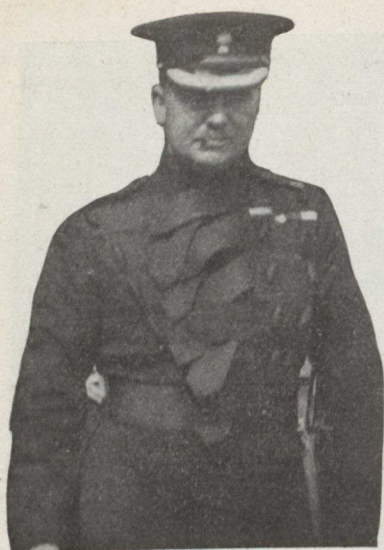


The Bandmaster at the Fair

A Talk on Various Phases of Music, with the Conductor of the Grenadier Guards

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE



Bandmaster Williams uses his baton like a magician's wand.

GREAT bandmasters are much rarer than great financiers. In the whole world there are probably not more than a score of really great bands. Among the score and far up among the few at the apex of the column is the band of the Grenadier Guards, forty-five members of

which have been playing for the past two weeks at the Canadian National Exhibition.

British military bands are in four classes: the Foot Guards, four of these; the cavalry bands; artillery and marine; then the line bands. The sixty-six players controlled by Bandmaster Dr. Williams may be the best of the first four; but that's a touchy matter to decide, when you have the Coldstreams and the Irish Guards to compare with. It's largely a matter of personalism in the bandmaster; and of some one quality in the ensemble of the band.

Now there is a partly indefinable something which the Grenadier Guards have that the other top bands of the Foot Guards have not got—in the same degree. That is an element of style; which appears both in the players and the conductor. You hear it in some of the most ravishing, zephyrish pianissimos that ever drifted out of that convex-ceilinged bandstand at the Exhibition so cleverly designed by Dr. Orr. You see it pictured in the peculiar, poetic curvilinear manoeuvres of the magician's wand in those white-gloved hands of the conductor; and that is as baffling to the ordinary bandsman as it is convincing and masterful to the player in the Guards.

"By George," said a local regimental bandmaster as he watched Dr. Williams, "if it weren't for the Guards fellows playing in those massed band performances, there would be all kinds of chaos with our men. You simply can't analyse that beat out by mere mathematics. But it gets the results. Just listen to that crescendo!"

For instance, you've heard and seen Sousa, by some supposed to be the premier bandmaster of the world; and of Sousa Dr. Williams has his own private opinions, most of them complimentary. The man who can't follow most of Sousa's beats must be blind. Mostly you may tell from the particular way he slices off the atmosphere whether the piece is in four-four or three-four or six-eight time. And there's usually the Sousaesque accent to give you the cue. Not so with Dr. Williams. The artist who would draw up the baton-picture of any given number of bars played by the Grenadier Guards would have a set of spirals and loops capable of giving points to any teacher of penmanship in a business college.

"Now, why do you do that?" I asked Dr. Williams, who does not mind in the least being quizzed about his style so long as he knows you are sincerely after knowledge; for he has many of the elements of a great teacher, and with all his severity in conducting, when he is at dinner loosens up in a genial style to let you right in to the secrets of his craft. He lives and breathes music; constantly in it. When I first clapped eyes on him at the Administration Building waiting for dinner he had a new manuscript on his knee, everlastingly keeping up with the times, studying the people for whom he plays and the country he plays in.

"Well, I dare say it's a bit peculiar," he admitted with a twinkle. "But you see if I avoid angles in my beat I very likely round off the sharp corners in the playing of my men. Music you know is not merely a matter of accent in rhythm. It is a

matter of curves, resembling the running of water which, as you know, may be made to whisper or thunder according to the way it runs."

"You believe that a band should be as nearly expressive to an orchestra as possible then?"

"Why not? A military band isn't always playing marches. We must give the best music of all sorts. We play hundreds of concerts a year to people who listen for music's own sake, just as your people do here at the Exhibition. We never could feed them on military fantasias and patriotic airs. Some art effect must be aimed at. Of course, we've very little time for rehearsals; but such as we have we devote mainly to the subtler effects and I think the people appreciate them."

"You play Beethoven, rather a rare thing for a band?"

The Doctor shrugged. "Of course, Beethoven wrote some tommyrot. But some of his symphonies suit a band very well. Why just the other day a Canadian girl here asked me if we were to play the Number Three symphony as she had it on her examination this year and wanted to coach in it. Of course I don't know how much good she would get out of hearing a band transcription."

"As to that, Doctor, I heard a young girl, not more than fifteen, humming the melodies in your Ruy Blas overture this afternoon."

"Very good. That's as good for her as ragtime, to be sure."

the Chant National is the real voice of the Canadian people. Now we are playing that or any of them as occasion warrants."

I asked him to agree that 'O Canada' was indeed a noble melody. He agreed; but not with the unbounded enthusiasm that we feel about it.

"You see," he said critically, "it's by no means quite original with—what's his name again?"

"Calixta Lavallee". I told him the story of how it came to be composed in 1881.

"Listen," he said; and he hummed a military air. "Do you see any resemblance?"

"Quite decidedly. Yes, but—"

"That's Handel's 'Scipio March,' which we play a great deal. I don't say 'O Canada' is a plagiarism on it; perhaps an unconscious similarity. Still 'O Canada' has many of the qualities of a really fine national hymn."

He criticised it, however, on the score of long notes, etc., and when I asked him what were the essential characteristics of a good national hymn;

such, for instance, as we should get in Canada some day, he said. Above all, simplicity and tunefulness; dignity of words and a good, simple, broad harmony, with not too great a range for the voice. "For we can't always be shouting war," he added.

"What do you think is the greatest national hymn, musically, I mean?"

He named 'La Marseillaise' as premier; but added:

"A bit too warlike, however; but what a magnificent thing! I think Haydn's Austrian hymn is one of the very best. The Russian, of course, is very fine; though a bit sombre. The German—no, 'Die Wacht Am Rhein' is not the national tune; that is the same as ours—'God Save the King.'"

"How do you account for the United States adopting the same tune?"

Another twinkle. "Really—are they not good at adopting?"

"By the way, Doctor, there is some difference of opinion as to the martial nature of 'God Save the King.' Is it really a march?"

"Well, strictly speaking of course not. The time is in three-four; which makes it impossible for the soldier with his adherence to 'left-right-left,' always accenting the left foot, to march to properly. We can, however, arrange it as a march by changing its time and lengthening the notes," and he hummed the way of it. "Sometimes, too, we take it very slowly in the march past as a sort of march."

He criticised the language of 'God Save the King' but paid a tribute to its dignity of melody, putting it easily first in that respect among the national songs. Questioned as to his own band he admitted that they were under discipline quite as rigid as the regiment to which they belonged except that bandmen do not live in barracks.

"We never should get the best results without it. My men take a pride in their work. They love it. They don't believe in going before the public unprepared. I wish all bands everywhere were so. It's really a pity—"

But I won't tell all he said along this line.

"Those stripes on the cuffs that some of your men have, what are they for?"

"They are for conduct. Six stripes is a maximum. One of my men you see has five."

"Well," glancing at his watch, "it's time for me to be getting into my scarlet togs for the massed band performance this evening."



The chief clarionetist has five stripes for good conduct.



All kinds of people at the bandstand, but all of one mind when listening to the band.

"But you play ragtime, once in a while?"

"Ah, yes; and little piffly picollo things, too, with a bit of flowery figured accompaniment; and we get plenty of applause for that sort of thing."

"No objections, I suppose?"

He twinkled again. "You see we've got to estimate the real value of that sort of thing. Candidly, I don't think you can bank very high upon the applause you get for really light music."

"But of course you appreciate enthusiasm over patriotic airs?"

"Much more. Patriotism may be cynically expressed as the last refuge of a scoundrel, but it's at least very well expressed in music and is important."

The bandmaster went on to say a few *apropos* things about patriotic airs, in which he has had a large experience, having conducted just about every sort of national hymn, anthem and song that is worth doing. Indeed, not long ago he corresponded with all the European powers to get national music for a fantasia which he is arranging for the band. So he had no objection to considering Canada's claim to having a national melody.

"Though I'm blest if I'm sure yet what that is," he said jocosely. "Before I knew Canada so well as I am beginning to do I was told that your national air was one of the French *chansons*." (He named and hummed the thing, which I have forgotten.) "But of course, it wasn't. I was told also that the 'Maple Leaf' is the thing. Of course, we play that. Then not long ago I was informed that 'O Canada,'