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# Personalities and Problems

No. 27—Augustus Stephen Vogt

*A Canadian Music Master who by a Choral Business System Became Famous in the Music Centres of Europe*

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

**D**R. A. S. VOGT, conductor of the famous Mendelssohn Choir, spent a year up till the end of March, 1913, "under fourteen flags" for the purpose of finding out what Europe could teach him in choral music. During his absence the Choir, which takes in a yearly revenue between \$25,000 and \$30,000, did nothing. His studio at the Toronto Conservatory of Music was occupied by other teachers. A week after he got back to Canada he was banqueted by members of the National Club. Near the end of a long, semi-confidential speech, the conductor—born in Canada of German parentage—described a most interesting rehearsal which he attended in Vienna, the great music hub of Europe. It was the Maennergesangverein. This is a club of singers containing a large number of prominent business and professional and political figures in Austria. At this rehearsal of Austrians high up in the social and financial and literary world of Europe, A. S. Vogt—asked if he could sing a bit—sat between the first lawyer and the leading poet of Austria, singing German chorales.

The long itinerary under fourteen flags from Finland to Milan and from Dublin to Vienna, seemed to reach a climax at this rehearsal. In imagination, members of the National Club could almost behold Sir Edmund Walker and Mr. J. W. Flavelle at the head table rehearsing in a Maennergesangverein.

Then in a few words the conductor brought his audience back to Canada. The vessel had called at Halifax. The ship's band played "God Save the King." Vogt went to the bandmaster and said:

"I notice that you have played nearly all the national airs of Europe on this trip. Can't you play—'O Canada!'"

Alas! the band had no scores of this piece.

"Then I'll make it my business to see that you get them with my compliments," said the maestro.

In New York, at the Metropolitan Opera House, A. S. Vogt heard again the Choral Symphony of Beethoven. He described the performance. "Gentlemen," he said, "as I listened to that great work I thought to myself, 'now if the Mendelssohn Choir could only sing the Choral Symphony in London and the Brahms Requiem in Berlin—'"

There was a murmur of assent at the head table. The conductor went on to say what such a trip of 225 choristers to Europe would mean in money; a total cost of \$75,000 and a certain loss even though the Choir should sing to capacity houses, of not less than \$30,000.

"You can get the money," broke out Mr. J. W. Flavelle, who is well known as a music fancier. He simply couldn't help it.

**T**HE President of the Bank of Commerce, who had proposed the toast of the guest—concurrent in this. He is the honorary president of the Choir.

"But even though we get the money," continued the astute "petit Napoleon" of choral music, "it would be useless without the co-operation of employers in letting the choristers go abroad for five weeks."

Whereat Mr. W. P. Gundy, President, rose and said he thought that members of the National Club could use their influence with employers for that purpose.

The point was carried. It is now morally certain that the Mendelssohn Choir—endorsed by the National Club—will go on a musical tour to Europe, not later than June, 1915.

Why should A. S. Vogt take the Mendelssohn Choir to Europe? What does this choir amount to as a national asset that prominent financiers should go into their pockets without solicitation to send 225 people junketing in the music centres of the Old World? Finally, what kind of man is this German-Canadian conductor who in the anniversary year and month of the Battle of Waterloo expects to take his choir on a five or six weeks' journey to England, France and Germany?

Probably to answer the last question would involve both the others. The Mendelssohn Choir is—A. S. Vogt. What it is he has made it. And he is like some other dominant notes in our national



The "Petit Napoleon" of Choral Music.

scale, the lucky beneficiary of circumstances. The old phrase about the stars in their courses fighting for Sisera has applied in this country to railway builders, manufacturers, financiers, politicians—and one choirmaster. To understand how A. S. Vogt has been in league with the stars one must retrace the story of how he was able to build up so remarkable an organization.

This goes back to boyhood days in the counties of Oxford and Waterloo. A. S. Vogt was the son of an organ-builder. This was a good start. At a very early age he became a baseball enthusiast on the village green; and he went about under his brother's management singing comical songs at concerts. While a lad of twelve, accustomed to the ivories from his father's workshop, he played a church organ in Elmira; afterwards in Berlin. While a youth of seventeen he packed up and went down to the New England Conservatory. This was the beginning of his high regard for the United States, where he has since become musically famous.

**S**TILL, under voting age he came back to Canada and took the organ of the First Methodist Church, in St. Thomas, Ont. This was his first serious charge. He made more of the organ than of the choir, however, and as yet had not discovered any tremendous possibilities in choral singing. After three years of this—saving his money—the young man decided to go to Germany. He was one of the first ambitious young Canadians ever seen in Leipsic.

It was during this three or four years in Germany that the Mendelssohn Choir was really born; mainly in the good old Kirche of St. Thomas, in Leipsic, where every Saturday afternoon the young man repaired to sit and shiver in a barn-cold church while the famous *a cappella* choir sang and rehearsed. And this marvelous unaccompanied music haunted him.

So he determined that when he got back to Canada he would have as good a church choir as that of St. Thomas. He was midway on the ocean when the choir committee of Jarvis St. Baptist Church engaged him as organist and choirmaster. He did not expect the post. When he landed he was simply pitchforked into it.

He was there but a Sunday or so when he started in to reform things. The congregation never would hold the last note on each line of the hymn "Abide With Me" the full four beats. Vogt determined to make them. For one service there was a mix-up. Then he got his way—as he usually does.

And he began to develop the art of unaccompanied singing, which under his index finger in Jarvis St. Church with the choir in a half moon all centring on his beat, gradually became a very beautiful and expressive musical service. Those were the good old days when people used to take more interest in church choirs and preachers than they do now.

At first Vogt went on the staff of the Toronto College of Music under Torrington, teaching both piano and organ. Here he stayed for a few years until Dr. Fisher, of the Toronto Conservatory, got him. About this time there was disbanded in Toronto a very select choral society, under W. E. Haslam. In 1894, with a number of these singers and his own church choir, Vogt decided—after talking the matter over with Billy Hewlett, a clever