

# Recent Musical Doings

*Great Birmingham Festival Under the Baton of Five Famous Conductors. Dr. A. S. Vogt gives his Choral Impressions of England, France and Germany. Songs of Debussy and Hugo Wolf are given a Unique interpretation in Public Drawing-room Recital*

By THE MUSIC EDITOR

THE most remarkable musical event in England during the past few weeks was the Birmingham Festival, which occupied four days. Sir Henry Wood was the conductor. The chorus numbered 351; the orchestra 145—which in America would be considered an overwhelming preponderance of orchestra. The choral works given were the two great Requiems, the Manzoim of Verdi, and the German Requiem of Brahms; Elgar's oratorio, "The Apostles," and "The Music Makers" (a new work); Bach's "St. Matthew," Passion Music; Walford Davies' "The Song of St. Francis"; Delius' "Sea Drift," "The Elijah," and Handel's "Messiah."

To say the least this is not an overplus of new works. All but two or three of the minor pieces have become nearly as familiar in England as "The Messiah." But it is a tradition among Englishmen, in some respects well worth approximating to in Canada, that the real worth of a great choral work is in the people's knowing it almost as well as the choristers. In Canada we have been much favoured by novelties which we have very much needed in order to give us an outline of what is being done in the world of choral compositions. Canadian audiences have heard works that are scarcely even mentioned in English choral circles. Yet the repertoire of a big festival chorus in England naturally far exceeds in variety and range that of any choral society in Canada.

The orchestral works given at the Birmingham Festival by the colossal band under the baton of Sir Henry Wood were, "New Symphony No. 4 in A Minor," by Sibelius, fragments of whose works have been given by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra; "Fifine at the Fair," a new orchestral drama by Granville Bantock, illustrating a poem of Robert Browning, and said by eminent critics to be one of the biggest things of its kind ever written in England; "Don Quixote," by Richard Strauss; Symphony No. 7, by Beethoven; overtures "Coriolan," "William Tell" and "Tannhauser."

The chief soloists were Mesdames Donalda (Canadian), Ackte, Muriel Foster, Clara Butt and Ada Forrest; Messrs. John McCormack, Clarence Whitehill, Gervase Elwes, and Thorpe Bates; instrumentalists, Moritz Rosenthal, pianist, and Pablo Casals, Spanish cellist.

Sir Edward Elgar, Granville Bantock, Walford Davies and Sibelius each conducted his own works.

Strangely enough, the most sensational work performed was "The Messiah," due to the very modern reading accorded to the work by Sir Henry Wood, a somewhat detailed account of which will appear in the December 21st issue of the COURIER.

FOR the past six months Dr. A. S. Vogt, conductor of the Mendelssohn Choir, has been in Europe on what he calls "A Canadian Musician's Wanderjahr," in an article written for the *Musical Times*, published in London. In this article he outlines his impressions, mainly of choral work, from the International Festival at Paris, last May, to the Birmingham Festival in October. Extracts, which show the astute and appreciative interest taken by this Canadian conductor in the choral affairs of Europe, are reprinted herewith. He says:

"Leaving Canada in April last, it was my good fortune to be present at the International Festival held in Paris, in May, at which about 180 of the best choirs of the Continent and England competed. No better opportunity could have been afforded for studying certain choral conditions of the Old World. It was soon made clear that French and British choral ideals were as far removed from each other as the Poles. In the principal competition for mixed-voice choirs, for instance, first honours were awarded a Belgian choir which, on account of fundamental tonal shortcomings and very faulty intonation, would in all probability hardly have been considered a serious factor in a competition presided over by a British board of adjudicators, or even by an International group of judges. The



Edmund Burke, the Famous Bass-Baritone, from Montreal. Helped M. Ysaye, Violinist, and Mr. Backhaus, Pianist, to Celebrate the Return to England of Mme. Melba in October. Mr. Burke is one of the World's Famous Mephistos.



Madame Donalda, also from Montreal, who Seems to be the Legitimate Canadian Successor to Mme. Albani. She Took Part in Elgar's Oratorio "The Apostles" at the Birmingham Festival. (From a Painting by Wilenski.)

relative positions of the British prize-winning choirs in this class would, apart from the foreign choirs, also doubtless have been changed had the adjudicating been done by English musicians. At the same time one was forced to the conclusion that the British choirs competing, whilst excelling in smoothness and roundness of tone, failed in certain interpretative qualities which the French judges evidently deemed absolutely essential to any performance aspiring to serious artistic recognition. Temperamentally, but more particularly in the subtler elements of rhythm and tonal colour, several of the foreign choirs achieved quite extraordinary results. Perhaps the most notable choral achievement of the Festival was the really superb singing of the Prague Societe des Instituteurs-Chanteurs, a men's chorus which, more than any other I heard, seemed to reveal most exhilarating rhythmic abandon and nuancing, combined with an almost orchestral command of colour and a warm and in most cases pure quality of tone.

"The Vienna Music Festival of last June provided rare opportunities for hearing a number of the leading choral bodies of the Austrian capital, including the famous Wiener Mannergesangverein and the very efficient mixed-voiced Imperial Society of Music Friends.

"In Germany my most pleasant choral sensations thus far have been those experienced through the remarkably fine singing of the choirs of St. Thomas' Church, Leipsic, and the Dom Kirche, Berlin. Church music in Germany does not, generally speaking, reach a high standard. But the two choirs named are certainly amongst the finest of their kind in the world.

"Those things which most impress one in a choral sense in travelling through England are the almost uniformly high vocal standard of its church choirs, the enthusiasm, endurance, and loyalty of its Festival choruses, and the inspiring spectacle presented by the multitudes attending such competitive events as the Blackpool Festival. The unusual technical efficiency and smoothness of tone displayed by the London choirs of St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Brompton Oratory, Westminster Cathedral, St. Margaret's, and others it has been my privilege to hear, bear eloquent testimony to what is being consistently demanded by England in its ecclesiastical music.

"Birmingham Festival of October provided me with my first English Festival experience. Several things profoundly impressed me here—quite apart from the brilliant achievements of the very fine

choir and the pronounced success won by Sir Edward Elgar in his new work 'We are the Music Makers.' These were the superb quality of the playing of the orchestra under Sir Henry Wood, and the undisputable triumph won by Professor Granville Bantock in the great orchestral novelty of the Festival, his orchestral drama, 'Fifine at the Fair.' One may safely predict that this work is destined to go the round of the great orchestras of the world.

"The choir appeared to be strongest in its altos and basses, the former in particular being most sympathetic and rich in tone-quality. The sopranos, although quite effective, seemed hardly equal to those of several Yorkshire choirs I have heard, whilst the tenors appeared somewhat hard in tone and slightly throaty in production. To an outsider the official returns of the paid attendance at the Festival proved disappointing. It is possible that the great artistic development which is taking place in British music is doing much to render obsolete the old-time 'Festival,' the very name of which, under present-day musical conditions, quite wrongly suggests a prevailing state of musical starvation. Or may the comparative indifference of the public be ascribed to the rather too solemn general character of the choral music offered at most of these important events?"

NOTHING demonstrates the musical advancement of a community better than the intuitive interest in special lines of

work by relatively small audiences. As has been more than once pointed out in this paper before, the audience of from three to five thousand assembled to hear a big soloist or a choral society is not necessarily a musical audience. But the coming together more or less regularly of smaller audiences to hear "chamber music" and select recitals of songs may be regarded as the development of a real clientele based upon sound musical appreciation. Such audiences are regularly assembled to hear such organizations as the Hambourg Concert Society, the Toronto String Quartette and the Dubois String Quartette, of Montreal. In a near future issue we hope to review the splendid work done thus far in this season by these three organizations.

Quite as thoroughly musical an audience a few days ago listened to the cultured recital of songs given in Conservatory Hall, Toronto, by Madame Benita Le Mar, who came to Canada last May with a splendid European reputation in song programmes. One obvious proof that art and not the box-office was the object of Madame Le Mar's recital was the fact that she limited the seating capacity of the hall to less than half what it normally contains. The floor of the hall was arranged as a drawing-room. The recital became a sort of musical conversation. The audience were both fashionable and cultured. They came to hear—the songs of Debussy and Max Reger and Hugo Wolf; not to have either a merely social evening or to glorify a singer.

Madame Le Mar's work on this occasion may be described as the almost purely impersonal art of giving to songs the interest intended by the composer. She repressed any personal peculiarities of her own that the genius of the song might get expression direct from the composer to the listener. In this she was eminently successful in all but one group of songs. In the four numbers of Debussy and the two of Hugo Wolf she was *par excellence* the interpreter. One could scarcely imagine delineation of moods more exquisitely and subtly conveyed through the medium of rarely difficult songs. In the hands of any but a thoroughly impersonal Debussyite the songs of this wonderful modern French composer would be an awful infliction. As done by Madame Le Mar they were a simple delight. Abstruse, even baffling, in musical form as they are, "De Reve," "De Greve," "De Fleurs" and "Le Soir" were a quartette of splendid simplicities in exposition. The Madame was quite

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