

# THE LEAGUE of COMPOSERS' REVIEW

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## WHO IS NEXT ?

BY EDWIN EVANS

IS the artistic fertility of a period wholly a matter of gifted individuals, or are the individuals themselves thrown up by the needs and impulses of their period? In other words, was Beethoven the dominating musical force of his period because he was a great man who happened by chance to be born in time to fill that position, or was he the expression, the *porte-voix*, of currents that were flowing at the time when his genius was shaping itself? Was Shakespeare an incident or a consequence?

There is no answer to such riddles, but that is no reason to refrain from asking them. Some there will always be who regard great men as incidents and great periods as due to the happy but fortuitous circumstance that several of them appeared in company, whilst others—and I am one of them—give the fullest credit to that assembly of forces, whether measurable or mysterious, which we conveniently include as environment. The word is inadequate. It is suggestive of physical surroundings, whereas the forces which determine the fertility of one period and the barrenness of another are as impalpable as air.

It is this feature of fertility or barrenness, and not the greatness of its individuals, that differentiates one period from another. There are instances in history of a great man appearing as a bolt from the blue, but they belong to periods or countries concerning which our information is relatively scanty. We cannot judge to what extent they were isolated. In all history that is fully recorded,

great men appear not as lonely eminences in an otherwise undisturbed plain, but as greater summits in mountain ranges.

Those who are sceptical concerning the worth of contemporary music sometimes ask the rhetorical question: "Where are your giants? Where is the Bach, the Beethoven, or the Wagner of today?" implying that there are none, and that music is therefore moribund. Allowing, for the sake of argument, that even the greatest of today are not as the giants of the past—which remains to be seen—this has no bearing upon the present state of music, which is probably healthier than ever before. It is a period of challenging, questioning, doubting, testing, discarding; that is to say, a period of intense and widespread intellectual and productive activity. Whether or not the great man has already appeared, the conditions are such as we know from all past history to be conducive to his appearance, whereas a stagnant musical world would hold no such prospect.

The particular contemporary phenomenon which we in England regard as a rebirth of our music exemplifies much that I have written above. Half a century ago the conditions of our musical world were so far from being conducive to the appearance of greatness that had a giant, by a *lusus historiae*, declared himself in our midst, I can scarcely imagine what we would have done to him, but it would probably have been something quite unpleasant. Before anything could happen it was necessary to set the stage. How the impulse to do so originated is one of those riddles that defy answering, but, somehow, stagnation gradually yielded to activity, and barrenness to fertility. Whether or not we have produced a towering figure, one which will continue to tower when the perspective has lengthened, we can certainly claim that in a period which, historically considered, is remarkably short, the conditions have become those from which greatness generally emerges.

Gathering momentum as it developed, the English renaissance culminated, for the present, in a generation of unprecedented intellectual activity. If the composers belonging to this movement are listed in order of seniority it will be seen that the greatest enrichment of repertoire has been contributed by a group of men most of whom were born in the six years 1874 to 1879. Here are a

few of the names: Holst, Gatty, Rootham, Tovey, Hurlstone, Martin Shaw, Waldo Warner, Quilter, Dunhill, Balfour Gardiner, Rutland Boughton, Holbrooke, Frank Bridge, John Ireland, Cyril Scott. At one end of the list add Vaughan Williams (1872), at the other Bax (1883), and the tally will be almost complete.

So far as we can judge at present, no corresponding group has made its appearance since, that seems likely to achieve the same aggregate importance. But even if, in due course, the names should appear neither so numerous nor so important as their predecessors, this would not be without precedent. The impulse which produced the vigorous early works of the Russian school was followed by an interval of recuperation from the effort.

Among the new men Lord Berners finds himself in the, to him no doubt exhilarating, position of the doyen, owing to his career having begun comparatively late. We first heard of him only seven years ago but he is in age a contemporary of Bax. His output is not voluminous but it is personal and significant, besides representing an angle of vision not unknown in other spheres of English artistic expression, but hitherto unaccountably missed in our music. That is why, whereas some English critics, arguing from surface indications, regard him as the most Latin of our composers, French critics frequently quote him as being the most English among them.

In reputation Lord Berners is a contemporary of Arthur Bliss, Herbert Howells, and Eugene Goossens, all of whom became known during the war period, and are now in their early thirties. Bliss and Goossens must by now be well known to the reader. Since neither is "news" in the editorial sense, let us turn to Howells who occupies a somewhat special position among these younger men. He is more aloof from the spirit of the day, which would probably class him as a romantic. There is in the air a misleading tendency to regard the lyrist as necessarily sentimental, and therefore a survival from the day before yesterday. That is rank heresy, for the lyrical impulse is of all ages. Here and there in Howells' best work there lurks an eclogue of considerable charm—not that he is lacking in sturdier qualities. The interpretation of our coun-

tryside is no monopoly of the "corduroy" or "Shropshire Lad" tone-poets.

Of Philip Heseltine, otherwise Peter Warlock, it is hazardous to speak. Though much of his music has been published he remains a dark horse. He, too, is a lyrist, of another kind. He has written some of the best as well as the breeziest songs of the day, incidentally recapturing the rollicking spirit of another day, for his Tudor predilections are there for all the world to see. Another aspect is revealed in *The Curlew*, the work performed this year at Salzburg, and in *An Old Song* for chamber orchestra. We expect much more of him. His contemporary and friend is E. J. Moeran, who has published a violin sonata and a string quartet, works in which the early influence of John Ireland can be traced, side by side with a robust personality not yet fully developed but of good augury.

These are the graduates among the new men. Of their juniors it is less easy to speak with confidence. A brilliant future has been predicted for Eric Fogg, on the strength of a startling and precocious facility. So far it has been mainly assimilative, but he is only twenty-one. At that age pronounced originality would be almost disquieting. W. T. Walton, who is a year older, has displayed more individuality. The string quartet performed at Salzburg last year has many of the faults of immaturity, apart from its excessive length. Yet it carries the conviction that here is a composer with something of his own to say, and this is confirmed in such other works as have been performed. Its selection by an international jury came as a surprise to his countrymen, few of whom had heard even his name.

There are, of course, many other names that occur to one, but this is no place for a mere catalogue. From this cursory survey it would seem that the immediate future may be less exciting than the immediate past, but with so much activity prevailing it would be hazardous to take even that much for granted.

