

## HALF-TIME IN ENGLAND

BY EDWIN EVANS

TO twenty years of a musical productivity such as England had not known for many generations there has succeeded a period of relative inaction, more apparent than real, which baffles many at home and all abroad. In some curious way it recalls a similar period in the evolution of modern Russian music, when criticism, long contemptuous of the new movement, had veered in its favor. By then its leaders had their most exciting years behind them, the one outstanding figure of the next generation, Glazunow, had prematurely adopted the manner of an elder statesman, the Conservatoire was turning out an army of little Rimskies whom it was difficult to distinguish one from another, and the barometer registered dull to fair. Though the English movement was a renaissance rather than the laying of a foundation, and though its authors were men of a different stamp, the accomplishment itself had, in its historical significance, some similarity to that of the Russians. The difficulties with which it had contended were of the same kind:—without, apathy or at best an insulting condescension; within, the lack of technical precedent and a consequent tendency to dilettantism. Its great merit in the eyes of the future historian will consist in its surmounting of those difficulties, and the outstanding works of the period will be cited as representing so many stages of the evolutionary conflict. We, however, are not historians of tomorrow, but interested observers of today, and for us the momentary outlook, detached from historical speculation, is not exhilarating. That extraordinarily fertile generation of composers born in the decade from 1872 (Vaughan Williams) to 1883 (Bax) is still active, though in some individual instances production has slackened, as it frequently does when recognition

has been won. Within a few months we have had from Vaughan Williams three important compositions: *Flos Campi*, a suite in six connected movements for viola, orchestra and chorus; the *Concerto Accademico* for violin and string orchestra; and a short oratorio, *Sancta Civitas*, works differing markedly in manner, but each significant of present developments. Since his Choral Symphony of last year Holst has given out little, whatever he may have held in reserve, but his *Terzetto* for flute, oboe and viola, consisting of two short pieces, is full of interest. Though nobody appears to have noticed it at the first performance, it is polytonal, each of the three instruments playing in a different key. Both Bridge and Bax are reported to have string quartets in readiness. If there has been a simmering down of interest, the reason must be sought, not here, but in the new generation, and in the change of the musical atmosphere.

Those men graduated in an environment of conflict which, though they may have doubted it at the time, was very good for them. Their potential successors presume to benefit by the outcome of struggles in which they took no part, and one is constantly aware of the absence of stimulus in their work. Particularly is this noticeable in a class of musicians which, formerly of little influence, has latterly gained the ascendant: those hailing from the Public Schools and older Universities. The "Holy Alliance" between the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the Royal College of Music, and the Times office in musical matters is no new phenomenon. At the very dawn of the movement this section of the community affected a wholly disproportionate interest in the works of Parry and Stanford as compared with those of Elgar, who was not of their clan. But their following in those days was more conspicuous in organ-lofts than in the arena of musical ideas. The Public Schools despised music. We have been accustomed to count this among the evils which we have had to overcome. Now that we are experiencing their influence some of us are beginning to sigh for the good old days when they let music alone. Their products are at present usurping a preponderance in our musical life which is not justified by their contribution to it. Apart from the two great figures of Vaughan Williams and Holst, their

pantheon is more articulate than creative, more assertive than helpful, and the public, whilst fully alive to the merits of those two, is rapidly tiring of the host of little men behind them. If these are the English musical world, it says, then let us give up pretending, for it is a dull game at the best. If they carry the day—and I still have enough optimism in me to believe that their reign will be short—we shall soon be in a rut, which, though it may look different, will be that of our Victorian forebears.

In composition this influence is particularly baneful. Vaughan Williams is a great music-maker not because of any methods or devices, but because of the personality expressed by their means. Unfortunately his methods are in themselves simple, and easy of superficial assimilation. Hence we have an army of youngsters writing neo-modal tunes—if you base them on the pentatonic you cannot go wrong—planking down a few triads wherever they sound well, confiding them to patient paper and calling the result composition. It is too painfully easy. Yet they are telling us that this alone is the true English musical idiom. If that were true we would indeed be a nation of amateurs. Of the two followings I much prefer the little Rimskies of yore. They may have had just as little to say, but at least they set about saying it with the zest of robust craftsmanship. Happily not all our young composers are of this anaemic complexion.



A curious feature of recent developments in this quarter of the horizon is that quite unconsciously, as I firmly believe, and by an independent evolution, the composers are beginning to use technical devices which show a close kinship with one of the Continental currents, and that the one which English criticism is least inclined to take seriously. Except in the "smart set," the aesthetic which has Jean Cocteau for its spokesman and Satie for its ancestor has found few here sufficiently interested to analyze either its principles or the methods of the composers influenced

by them. But among these composers of ours the seniors, who have juggled with triads for half a lifetime, have ended by superimposing them, whereby they have exposed themselves to occasional lapses into the polytonal language of Milhaud, whilst the juniors, more susceptible to the present reaction in favor of directness, are once in a while caught red-handed, writing what Auric might have written had he been an Englishman with the English lilt in his ears. What will happen to them when Newman gets to hear of it is on the knees of the gods. Imbecility is his verdict upon poor Auric. In that he is supported in varying degrees by the majority of our critics. A Frenchman recently remarked to me that the English do not like "pleasant" music, citing this as an instance. According to him the puritan strain in their ancestry inclines them either to despise it as inane or frivolous, or to condemn it as sinful, and on the merest suggestion of Gallic pleasantries the latent puritan becomes alert, not to say rampant. It is to this extent true, that many of our critics appear to regret the absence of moral or emotional "uplift" in the music of today, and are disposed to explain that it is omitted because the composers are incapable of imparting it. A curious parallel phenomenon is that, because the cause of Auric and his like finds most support among the amateurs of preciousness, it is regarded as "high-brow," whereas surely the lofty temples are those which admit no idols below Brahms or Wagner. However, this is a side-issue.



Outside the ranks of the dominant class are several young composers whose work deserves attention, but it would require a special article to deal with them. They appear at present to be neither so numerous nor so important as those who made their names twenty years ago, but this may quite easily be an illusion fostered by the aforesaid change of atmosphere, which I regard as the dominant factor in our musical situation. Five years ago we were in such close touch with the world's music that I was

lured to write an article on "London as Musical Forum." We were then hearing more modern music than any capital in Europe, and, I believe, any city in America. There was a bright and alert interest in new movements, and an animated discussion of the aesthetic problems involved in them. It was at that time possible, using London as centre, to observe the making of musical history. Today we hear very little that is new unless we go abroad in search of it, we have lost contact with the currents of musical opinion elsewhere, and in the making of musical opinion at home the conservatives hold practically undisputed sway. How so complete a change can have occurred in so short a time is almost beyond explanation. One can at best hint at a few of the chief contributory factors.

The first is economic. The expense of concert-giving has grown, the attendance waned, the latter in turn being attributable partly to economic stress and partly to competitive and cheaper modes of music-making. The outcome is that the concert-giver is driven to "play for safety" both ways, by avoiding costly rehearsals, and by performing only such works as are likely to attract the largest numbers. Both ways this means the elimination of contemporary music, for it requires additional and abundant rehearsal, and neither in London nor anywhere else has it ever been the chief "paying proposition." Moreover, in London the unprecedented activity of those post-war seasons has left an aftermath of musical indigestion. Perhaps we overdid it. Anyway the concert-giver cannot afford to take risks under present conditions, and those who insist upon an occasional hearing of heterodox music are, like the early Christians, driven into the Catacombs, of which there is an inspiring example at Westminster, excavated by the Music Society. Meanwhile the attitude of the Press has changed. Owing to the fact that the musical advertisers, who are in reality quite as numerous as those connected with the stage, seem incapable of making their collective voice heard, the more commercially inclined papers are disposed to treat music as of no consequence, there being "nothing to it." In these it has gradually been pushed to the wall, and what little appears is monopolized by the "human interest" of Tetrassini's breakfast or Kubelik's twins. This, and the disappearance of

two journals through amalgamation, has considerably reduced the number of critics who are allowed to exercise their true functions. It so happens that conservatives preponderate among the survivors. Take, for instance, the introduction to London of *Pierrot Lunaire*. There is room for many shades of intelligent opinion concerning that work. The one which has least in its favor is the flippant one that it is nonsense, and that was mainly the opinion that found expression in the London press. We had evidently slipped back to 1913, when the same view was taken of *Le Sacre du Printemps* and left practically uncontradicted. When ridicule is added to the other disadvantages of heterodoxy, it is plainly better for concert-givers to cling to the orthodox. The result is an atmosphere which is not conducive to the free emergence of original talent; no doubt a titanic genius would make light of such matters, but the musical world is not made of isolated cones. It consists of a mountain range in which some peaks are higher than others.

