



1894-1950

British Music and the BBC

by E J Moeran

A genuine renaissance has come about in the field of modern British orchestral music. The BBC untrammelled by box office considerations, is in a position to present adequately complex and unfamiliar orchestral works, thoroughly rehearsed, in such a manner that they may become known to the public.

Musicians, and composers in particular, owe much to the BBC. On the outbreak of war there was a hiatus in the broadcasting of good music which lasted, fortunately, only for a short time. The authorities soon realised that first-class music was a real necessity.

For those who took the trouble to tune into foreign wavelengths it was noticeable that, with the exception of France, England alone - "the land without music" - maintained a consistently high level of orchestral music, both in quantity and quality. German broadcasting was almost entirely given over to political propaganda, or to martial music blared out by military bands.

Prior to the Battle of France in 1940, Paris maintained its outside relays of public symphony concerts, but in England, at a time when conditions for orchestral music-making was precarious, the BBC Symphony Orchestra upheld a policy of performing not only the classics but the music of to-day, both British and foreign.

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The BBC Symphony Orchestra has undoubtedly done more than any other concern in awakening in music lovers a keen stimulation for the music of their own land. This is proved by the fact that the gramophone companies have found it worth while to record and market the works of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bliss, Walton, and others.

After all, these companies are not public philanthropic societies; they could not be expected to incur the enormous expense of manufacturing such records unless it were reasonably supposed that purchasers would be forthcoming.

In pre-broadcasting days, the literature of modern symphonic music was virtually a closed book to those living far from the few towns possessing, or regularly visited by, a first-class orchestra. Broadcasting has made it possible for this wider public to discover new beauties, hitherto undreamt of.

A careful analysis of BBC programmes will show that a very fair share of the programmes is invariably allotted to native productions, at any rate, as far as orchestral music is concerned.

The Regional stations, too, have done well in this respect. There were certain works suitable for these programmes which were in danger of dropping out of the general repertory altogether. Ian Whyte, in charge of the BBC Scottish Orchestra, frequently reminds us that Stanford was no mean writer for the orchestra. In a lesser degree this would apply to Whyte's compatriots, Mackenzie and Hamish Macuna, whose music also may be heard from time to time broadcast from Glasgow

Outstanding

At Manchester the BBC Northern Orchestra is handicapped by having to play in a studio with poor acoustics. Nevertheless, Charles Groves manages to perform programmes of the greatest interest. Since his appointment as conductor of this orchestra, he has staunchly championed the cause of native music. His recent performance of Edward Rubbra's Fourth Symphony was an event of outstanding importance.

At Birmingham, when the war broke out, the Midland Regional Orchestra was dispersed to other activities. Previously, that great conductor, the late Leslie Heward, made a musical history with his Friday broadcast concerts. Probably a greater variety of music, old and new, familiar and unfamiliar, was packed into the programmes than in any other series of regular concerts which were ever given in this country.

Where else, for example, has anybody heard a *Sinfonie Singuliere* by Franz Berwald, the Swedish composer born in 1796, the 150th anniversary of whose birth is being celebrated this year by his countrymen? Where else the pianoforte concerto by the contemporary Czech, Arthur Willner?

It may have been forgotten that the BBC saved the Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts at a time when, owing to financial difficulties, they were at the point of lapsing altogether. It was bold policy, too, to carry on these concerts during the war, and subsequently at Albert Hall after Queen's Hall was bombed in 1941. The Prom programmes still continued to uphold the cause of British music. The annual list of novelties by native composers has always been one of the main features.

At a time when there was an exceptionally large population of foreign visitors in London, serving in the forces, or engaged in war activities, it was good policy to display modern British music. The BBC certainly seized this opportunity as regards contemporary composers, or near contemporaries, such as Elgar, Delius, and Holst. There has, however, been an unaccountable neglect at the Proms of the great English masters of the past.

It is a thousand pities that foreign visitors should have been afforded practically no acquaintance with the music of Purcell, who is not only England's greatest composer but one of the supreme masters of all time, save through the famous Trumpet Voluntary, which has since turned out to have been the work, not of Purcell, but of one Nathaniel Clark.

The Albert Hall, in spite of its echo, lends itself admirably to the sound of a large body of stringed instruments, especially in music which is fairly slow-moving, and which demands the utmost sonority. The Chaconne of Purcell certainly would sound impressive in this building.

The effect of the magnificent String Fantasies of Byrd would be superb played by the full complement of the strings of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. There is probably no body of string players in the world that could surpass them in this sort of music.

The splendid work on behalf of British music done by the BBC has not had its counterpart in every branch of music. Certainly the BBC Chorus, and the smaller company of singers under Leslie Woodgate, have done fine work in the presentation of compositions, sacred and secular, from the Elizabethan Madrigal to present day choral music. But in the field of chamber music, piano music, and, above all, in that of song, there has been a lamentable failure.

Golden Age

How many listeners are familiar with the Ayres of Dowland, Campion, Jones, Rossiter, John Danyel, Tobias Hume, or, on fact, any of that band of Apollos of the Golden Age of English music?

To return to more recent times, Peter Warlock has been described as the greatest song-writer since Purcell. He has published over 100 songs; yet he is known to the public only by some half-dozen "chestnuts" which are repeated with sickening regularity. The same might be said of John Ireland, undoubtedly the most considerable English song-writer alive and active to-day. It is continually dinned into us that Ireland wrote "Sea Fever," and one or two other songs.

Concerning his more important output, including the song-cycles "Marigold," "The Land of Lost Content," the Thomas Hardy poems, or the Harold Monro Rhapsody for voice and piano - all of them works which should be taking their rightful place as classics of twentieth-century song, the outside listening world is kept in almost complete ignorance.

John Ireland has also produced a large body of extremely original and thoroughly pianistic keyboard music. It seems extraordinary that the BBC keeps us in the dark as to this side of Ireland's creative activity; but possibly not quiet so extraordinary when we find that this neglect also applies to the piano

music of other British composers such as Bax, Frank Bridge, Howells and Alan Bush.

Singers are a much maligned race; they are said to be lacking in expertise and erudition.



However, it is not altogether singers and instrumentalists who are to blame here. There have been far too many cases in which those who have wished to broadcast contemporary British work have not been allowed to do so. It would seem that in this department of the BBC there is room for more erudition and enterprise on the part of the directive.

We are now awaiting the promised addition to broadcasting of an extra wavelength [*the Third Programme, now Radio 3*]. Let us hope that when that happy event comes to pass the programme standard of music in the smaller forms may be improved, and may bear comparison with the excellent fare provided in the orchestral and choral broadcasts.

After all, in music as in painting or poetry, it is not size that counts. A. E. Housman's "Shropshire Lad" has become accepted as a classic. Yet the longest by far of these poems consists of 76 lines, while the majority of them are made up of less than half-a-dozen four or five-line stanzas.

The songs of Hugo Wolf remain, while the vast and bulky symphonies of his contemporaries, Raff and Rubinstein, which once took the world by storm, are now almost completely forgotten. And one poem alone, "Heraelitus," a verse translation of a mere eight lines, has conferred immortality on the name of William Johnson Cory so long as the English

language may remain.

from Cavalcade

June 8, 1946

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