

THE NEW SPIRIT IN ENGLISH MUSIC

BY EDWIN EVANS



IN speaking of the new spirit in English music, we are speaking of a *fait accompli*—much more *accompli* than the Treaty of Versailles and many more events of the political world which have occupied acreage in the press. There *is* a new spirit in English music. This is scarcely the place to relate how it arose, for it is a long story. There were precursors, whose moral influence upon their times was of far greater value than their own personal contribution to English music. There was one who broke down many barriers of prejudice. Then came others who expended so much energy upon the problems of emancipation that they had little left to profit by it when it came.

Finally there were some who, benefiting by the perseverance of their elders, though not always gracious enough to acknowledge this, came upon a scene where, for the first time since Tudor days, there was a welcome for English music on its merits.

During the struggle there was an opening for knight-errantry. It was necessary that English music should “try out” its new spirit. And the world is full of people who will howl in derision during the process of “trying out” anything, from a new spirit in music to a new invention in collar studs.

I do not feel that I am “crabbing” England if I say that at a critical time they were particularly obnoxious, and that one of the amusing features of musical life in England is the flow of apologetic eloquence that is emitted by them today.

But far worse was the unshakable apathy of those who said “Beethoven is good enough for me.” Imagine for a moment what the state of the drama would be if people said “Molière is good enough for me.” Or of painting, if their interest

stopped dead at Rembrandt. Still, that apathy has begun to waver. The new spirit today is too powerful to be ignored. Even newspaper editors, who lead a cloistered existence and hear little of the talk of the world, have heard of such names as Holst, Bax, Goossens, or Bliss. The first performance of a new work of any of these has today the "news-value" that was formerly the monopoly of the foreigner.

The days of knight-errantry—otherwise of propaganda—are over so far as England is concerned. The battle is won. As for other countries, naturally we desire that they should become acquainted with our music, but all that we ask is that they should bury, as being out of date, the old prejudice that we have none. Once that barrier disappears, our music must take its chance in the world, like any other. All that we want is a fair field and no favour.

Now that this new spirit, self-reliant, buoyant, and individualist rather than nationalist, occupies the foreground in our musical life, a new duty devolves upon the publicist: that of protecting it against misinterpretation. The mere fact that we, so long the under-dog in all musical affairs, should now claim equality, is constantly described elsewhere as a recrudescence of jingoism, a perpetuation of the war-spirit, an anti-foreign prejudice, and various other unpleasant things. It is none of these.

Quite recently an Italian journalist unbosomed himself in his home organ of the statement that "no foreigner need apply" in England, whereupon one of my confrères promptly pointed out to him that the most important works of the modern Italian school had found more ready acceptance in England than in their own country. Further back, a French publisher assured me that there had been more copies sold in England than in France of certain French music deemed "advanced" at the time of its publication. This country remains as hospitable as it ever was. But it has become critically more independent. It has ceased to endorse automatically, as it once did, the critical labels attached to musical imports. These have to bear a more searching comparison. Our composers have been sharpening our tastes.

Even in the case of Germany, whose most recent imports have found scant favor, there was neither musical xenopho-

bia nor political bias. The few works we have heard did not seem to us worthy either of our present audience, or of Germany's own past. But the choice of works was not particularly fortunate. Let a new triumph of German genius be revealed and it will not wait long for recognition in England—perhaps not even so long as in its home. This alleged xenophobia is one of the illusions to be dispelled.

Another concerns the nature of the new spirit. We have become more alert, more receptive, more confident of our own judgments. We have not changed our national character, any more than we have changed our skins. The English remain a predominantly conservative nation. It may be that some day we shall recover the initiative that made some of our Tudor classics more "modern" in their day than their contemporary, Palestrina; but for the present, as E. J. Dent wrote the other day, "even our most advanced composers are considered quite old-fashioned by the advanced composers abroad."

We are a cautious people. We take an absorbing interest in those advanced composers. We not only listen to their music with close attention, but we discuss it more thoroughly, more dispassionately than ever before. But our own composers concern themselves more with making music than with making devices. At this stage of our progress they are right, for the foundations of our modern musical edifice are of too recent date to bear such superstructures. Our musical idiom is of today, not of tomorrow. We are content that it is not of yesterday. Hence the subversive element among us is not prominent. We are, in the main, building, not destroying. We do not regard it as a reproach that we have at this stage no revolutionary genius in our music.

Finally, let no foreign critic suppose for an instant that, because the intellectual element has become so active in our music, we are pretentious enough to attribute the same strength to other elements. Because there is in our midst a strong nexus of new and active musicality, we do not claim that as a nation we are becoming musically superior. We know only too well our national shortcomings. To put our present position in a nut-shell, I should say that, on the creative side, the English are being given much better music than they deserve, whilst

on the interpretative side they are, in the main, less well served than they should be.

It is lamentably possible in England to be a celebrity and live on the fringe of penury. That does not argue a profoundly musical nation. Even allowing for the economic consequences of the war England does not give music as much support, in proportion, as America does. For that there are a multitude of reasons with which I cannot deal here beyond remarking that our plutocracy appears to be absorbed by other interests. Hence much of our best material is wasted. We have, for instance, orchestral players whose equal would be hard to find, but because of the economic factor they are not used as they should be, and our standard of orchestral playing is liable to suffer.

I believe these disadvantages to be mainly of a temporary nature. They will decrease as the economic crisis passes, and as the newer recruits to our plutocracy learn how to spend money with dignity. We have no illusions on this point, and to know the disease is the first step towards effecting the cure. In some respects, however, the interpretative aspect of our music is as healthy as the creative. We have produced a few executants of the foremost rank, some of whom have visited America, and our programs, at least, are as interesting as any I have seen from other sources. In fact a tasteless program is the surest way to defeat on our concert platform. That, in any case, is a great blessing.

