

# The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library

## MUSIC CHRONICLE

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*Between 1930 and 1932 IB published five reviews of recent musical events in Oxford in the Oxford Outlook, of which he was editor from vol. 10 no. 52 (May 1930) to vol. 12 no. 57 (February 1932), jointly with Arthur Calder-Marshall for no. 52, with Richard Goodman for nos 55–7. For the first three reviews he used the pseudonym 'Albert Alfred Apricott' ('A.A.A.' except in the first case); all but the last review appeared under his editorship.*

### I

*Oxford Outlook* 10 no. 53 (November 1930), 616–27

‘THIS FESTIVAL [...] is an attempt to display as fully as could be the musical activity of Oxford in its many and varies forms.’ The attempt was nothing if not praiseworthy, and a small group of individuals genuinely exerted themselves to make a success of it. But it was very moderate. Everything was smoothly and efficiently managed, and there were, it is true, isolated moments which seemed to justify all the labour and publicity which was spent on it. But there were other moments, moments which made one wonder whether it was necessary to hold a festival, whether there were not aspects of artistic life in the city which it were better not to show to the world, even though to condemn them outright would perhaps be unfair and ungenerous.

There are several causes, of which it is useless to enumerate the unremovable, why the success of the Festival, and of our local music generally, is never more than mediocre. But the reason which touches us most deeply, because the responsibility is not difficult to fix, is the obvious stolidity and unresponsiveness of the musical masses; either the lack of musical education, or of enthusiasm, or of knowledge of what is happening in the outer musical world – or some or all of these – contribute to make every composition and performance for which Oxford is responsible tepid and provincial. One is even allowed to complain when this happens at Birmingham or Liverpool; but what is one to say about cultured apathy in Oxford? Wild extravagance is better, is more civilised, than this torpor. For it is quite clear, and everyone in theory agrees, that the arts must either live intensely or quickly

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commit suicide; but to drag on a minor existence is worse [617] than extinction, is to become a travesty. This indictment is vague, and certainly exaggerated. It is the former because here to specify is invidious, and the latter in order to draw attention to itself; it is exaggerated, but surely in the right direction. It may be understood by those at whom it is directed, or it may not. In either case no more can be done.

To come to detail. The orchestral beginning of the Festival was marked by a concert conducted by Mr Guy Warrack, whose musicians played harshly and not in concord with each other; they became increasingly undisciplined, and Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony sounded loose, loud, and terrible; it was never a great work, though it almost passed off as one under Nikisch, who was strangely fond of what he called its Eurasianism; but on 5 May it was grandly maltreated.

On the other hand, 'Solomon' was wholly delightful. Perhaps the English tradition of Handel worship is still alive in the hearts of the Oxford Bach Choir, of Miss Isobel Baillie, Miss Mabel Ritchie and Miss Margaret Balfour (soloists). Of Messrs Dykes Bower and Christopher Cowan (continuo and organ) and of Dr W. H. Harris, who conducted. For they all applied themselves to their tasks with an ardour which sometimes rose to enthusiasm; but it is quite dead in Mr Steuart Wilson, who seemed to sing without pleasure, so that many of the peculiar little tags and conceits of Handel and his contemporaries, which it is possible to think delightful and look on with genuine affection, in his rendering were made stiff and ridiculous; it is not difficult to do this, but requires great heartlessness in the doer. However, the performance treated as a whole was one of the best events of the Festival, and Dr Harris earns our gratitude and admiration.

The Bach Concert was more ambitious [618] and the performance correspondingly poorer. The Oxford Orchestral Society under Mr Reginald Jacques played competently, but the Oxford Harmonic Society sang with far more vigour than skill, and in the motet 'Come, Come, O Jesu, Come', became patchy and scrappy, and (the comparison is not gratuitous) resembled the LMS Clearing House Choir in one of its unbridled performances. Mr Tucker, pianist in the D Minor Concerto, played with excessive modesty and restraint for that full-blooded work, but with enviable skill, and not without feeling. Miss Silk has a thin silvery voice,

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justly famous for its purity and undoubted religious emotion; her understanding of her art far outruns the quality of her voice; but it has a frail nobility of its own, for all its pious mannerisms. It was not a very satisfactory concert, but it is essentially right that this homage should have been paid to Bach, however inadequate the means.

What are we to say of the concert which followed the next day, and which consisted of chamber music arranged by the Oxford University Musical Club and Union? The works performed were by Ernest Walker, by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, by Arnold Bax, by J. A. Sykes, by Bernard Naylor, by Herbert Murrill and by W. A. Mozart. Of the Oxford composers Dr Ernest Walker was by far the most modern and sophisticated: his Violincello Sonata is an intricate, reflective, interesting work, in places even inspired, not by genius but by a quality difficult to describe, a kind of intelligent artistry, an acquired talent for making music, faintly academic perhaps, but never dull and never shallow.

We waited for what was to follow with considerable impatience. Was there or was there not talent or even genius among our contemporaries? It is peculiarly sad that the absence of it which this [619] concert demonstrated should have taken the form that it did. Neither Mr Sykes nor Mr Naylor showed any immaturity or any of the extravagances or other faults of youth. The work of both was perfectly grown, that of Mr Naylor even senile. The Rhapsody for Flute and Pianoforte by Mr Sykes was agreeable, and had an honest, straightforward style. Mr Naylor's Rhapsody for Viola and Pianoforte is a wonderfully anaemic work, and seemed all the more so for continual self-conscious attempts to inject vigour into it by artificial means. It is very dull, but, again, it is not raw or callow. It is quite competent, even if loose, in form. But there is, so to speak, nothing positive in it, only a thin, greyish ghost of matter impotently diffused through it, incapable of rousing interest. Neither did it gain by following Bax's beautiful and brilliant 'Moy Mell'. Mr Murrill's songs are swift, funny, lively little things, which, even if slight in texture, ran gaily and sprightly, to everyone's evident enjoyment. Once the lethargy was lifted, was audience was prepared to listen to the Mozart Clarinet Quintet in A Major, the most excellent performance of the entire Festival.

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Then, on the next day, came the Mass in D. It is very difficult to pass fair criticism on the performance. It would be strange, and even miraculous, if a choir of amateurs were equal to the task; it is monstrously difficult to sing, and the choir did convey the greatness of it more faithfully than could be expected; while Sir Hugh Allen is surely the best choral conductor in the land. Our grievance is of a different kind altogether. It seemed to us that the work was radically misunderstood; it is obviously a proud and even violent work, petulant, not plaintive, at times almost angry and threatening; and this is indeed the mood which would expect from a man who was known [620] to treat his God with great intimacy, to speak plainly to Him and even upbraid Him stormily, whenever he was moved by the injustices of the world. But instead of being treated as a work of enormous, almost sacrilegious, audacity, it was sung as though it were a work of gentle Catholic humility, a tranquil mass by Palestrina, or a tender, plaintive supplication by Bach, or by Mozart. Even so, the 'Credo', which not only defies description, but which even memory cannot conjure up, which can only be heard and leave the mind unsettled and comfortless, and cure it only by being heard again – this 'Credo' emerged triumphantly even though it was only half understood. After that one was anyhow in no mood for cavilling, though 'The Banks of Green Willow', which was then performed, tried all our patiences.

But the peculiar triumph of the Festival lay not in its orchestral nor in its choral works, but in its opera. If Dr Vaughan Williams in *Sir John in Love* does not rise to the heights of genius, he gets as near it as a man of talent can, for it is an excellent, almost flawless, work. The music seems to grow with and out of the words themselves, which seemed not set to it, but to have generated it, and to blend with it into a genuine, interpervasive whole. It is as if the composer had somehow succeeded in penetrating through the comedy to the springs and background of Shakespeare's inspiration, and assimilated himself to them with rare felicity, so that he stands to his material as Schumann stood to Heine's songs, or as Mendelssohn or Wolf sometimes stood to them; and this community of course makes the music now run gaily, and now move with dignity, with folk song and original invention so interwoven and integrated that the texture seems spontaneously created, homogeneous, somehow simultaneously both artificial and unartificial, and [621] uniquely fitting to its theme and words, far

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more so than anything in Wagner, but rather as in Rimsky-Korsakov, in *Le coq d'or* or in *Sadko*. The fun, as there, is at once rich and pointed, but it is peculiarly English, in excellently graceful and fresh fashion, filled with solid but winged substance. We do not know whether these dense clusters of epithets can convey any impression of the delights of this opera; it is a poor way of showing appreciation, but we can do no more. This triumphant end of the Festival obscured many weaknesses; later it only served to reveal them in greater detail.

After this we settled down to our normal, unexciting fare as provided by the Music Club. There were two evenings at least on which the quality of performance sank below the normal, and was frighteningly bad; but otherwise, though the programmes were more uneventful than usual, the performances were very competent, especially that of the Brosa Quartet, and there was one strange night when the Marie Wilson Quartet made a fierce onslaught on some Brahms, and galloped through it with strange sound and fury, completely ignoring the composer's indications of slower tempi, which was very bewildering, and still seems unreasonable. But this was the only lapse from the humdrum. Meanwhile a nobler excitement was aroused by the visit of three virtuosi, all women, and all remarkable.

To praise Mme Landowska is almost effrontery; had there been no harpsichord it would have had to be invented for her to play on, because she plays for it rather than on it, and in doing so reveals what ought to be meant when 'fine art' is spoken of. Everyone knows that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced enchanting music, but not everyone knows [622] what is signified; when one remembers Mme Landowska and her Scarlatti or her Rameau, one can only wonder why most epithets here suddenly turn banal.

The same, but more curiously and interestingly, is shown by Mlle Jelly D'Aranyi. She is a distinguished and serious artist, but essentially a virtuoso, in so far as she loves the instrument more deeply than the composer, and looks at everything with its eyes; her hand must feel definite physical pleasure when it embarks on long adventures in the slender and intricate cadenzas and finally emerges on to the broad, smooth surface of the slow theme. The great composer-virtuosi of the eighteenth century had this same passionate love for their instrument, to the exclusion of almost

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everything else, and the same tendency to regard music as primarily a divine means of enhancing its glory and their pleasure. Like them, she is a willing slave to her instrument. Hence the singular sympathy with which she renders their masterpieces; Vitali's Ciaconna could not have been better played than it was by her one evening in Balliol, nor yet Stravinsky's suite on the themes of Pergolesi, nor de Falla, who among the moderns most closely approaches that attractive ideal, all played on that same evening.

But this attitude is sometimes fatal; the *Kreutzer Sonata* was, on another occasion, in the Town Hall, played by her with such fire and brilliance that its depth, its complexity, its shadows, the part played in it by uneasy thought was obliterated, and the whole was made altogether too physical and too obvious. Her performance of the Bach Concerto in E Minor, for example, was a delight to hear, because she took pleasure in revealing the splendour and boldness of the work, but the remote and translucent quality of its slow movement had vanished completely; [623] it still was slow and beautiful, but it had become rich and solid and lost portions of its essence in the transmutation. Everything Mlle D'Aranyi touches she turns into the purest gold (in Brahms she is magnificent), but there are nobler elements than gold, to which those alone whom their love of an instrument leaves free to look beyond it can ever attain. Which brings us to the difference between her and Myra Hess.

Miss Hess has achieved a kind of freedom; she can afford to forget her piano, and totally immerse herself in what she is playing; she never, under any circumstances, consciously interprets herself, only the composer. With a singular lack of egoism she succeeds in forgetting herself, and allowing us to forget her too, which Mlle D'Aranyi never does, and indeed cannot do; with the latter, one is continually made aware of difficulties triumphantly surmounted, of favourite patches in the texture of her music to which she eagerly hastens, and communicates to you the vast thrill which it gives her to linger over them with open, enthusiastic partiality. This is not mere technique, but genuine artistry, virtuosity of the best and highest order. But with the former, if difficulties are surmounted, they are not allowed to be felt as such, and there is no bias and no intrusion of her person; there is a real attempt to resurrect the original emotion of the composer with a faithfulness and a single purpose to interpret, which shuts out all other desires, so that

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while it is being fulfilled, she does not attempt to evaluate her own material, to treat some parts as better and others as worse, but strives only to reveal the progress of a single experience, by somehow entering it and becoming herself the subject of it, with no thought of its objectness, of how it may look to those outside. The greatest, and in one [624] sense the only, real exponent of this way of playing is Artur Schnabel; there are many who realise that from him they heard Beethoven for the first time. No one at all can properly be compared to him; but if it were possible to do it for anyone, one would gladly do it for Miss Myra Hess.

We cannot end these already unwieldy notes without some reference to the Opera Club. It began in really noble fashion. The courage, imagination and musical intelligence which the choice of Monteverdi's *Poppaea* showed still fills us with admiration for the founders. But then inspiration seemed to leave it. One could not complain of the choice of *Der Freischütz*; one might be bored by it, and think that Weber had no more life in him, but it is the earliest romantic opera, and it is a classic, and it contains undoubted genius. The *Bartered Bride* which followed was in more dubious taste; Smetana had not a spark of genius, and the opera does not disprove this; but it was very agreeable to listen to, and possibly the origins of openly nationalistic music in Europe ought to be interesting; besides which the Opera Club, after living in the company of giants, might with some justification plead that it was weary, and wanted something light and comic as a relief. By this time *Poppaea* and the ideals which that seemed to point to had been well-nigh lost sight of. Still, the Opera Club had so far shown itself a friend to music, and one wondered what would come next.

The possibilities were wide and alluring. If the committee boggled at Handel, there was Cimarosa's wonderful *Secret Marriage* for their choosing, or the great operas of Gluck; there was Schumann's charming *Genoveva* or Hugo Wolf's *Der Corregidor*, which was admitted to be a work of genius and had rarely been performed; or if something gayer was demanded, there are the delightful fantastic operas of [625] Rimsky-Korsakov; or, as seemed likely, something modern would be chosen, since everyone with any pretensions to taste was obviously eager to hear works about which Germany has been talking so long and so excitedly; there was Hindemith's *Cardillac*, or Berg's strange *Wozzeck*, or Kodaly's excellently witty *Háry János*, the suite of which has often

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been heard in England. The Opera Club does not depend on the support of unlettered masses; it can afford to ignore stageability and to set up some sort of purely musical standard. We wondered, not with a certain amount of misgiving, what it would select, hoping that one of the above works would fire some influential imagination. Its choice was in due time announced; it fell on Albert Lortzing.

At least now one knows what that standard is, and what one may expect in the future. For if Lortzing, then why not Flotow and Nicolai and Suppé and Herold and Millöcker? There is no end to the number of ninth- and tenth- and eleventh-rate German composers of the last century whom a scrupulous historian would be obliged to enumerate. They are, it is true, mostly dead and done with in their own native land; it has fallen to the lot of the Oxford University Opera Club to bring them to life again. All the bottomless vulgarity of Meyerbeer is preferable, because he has some real vigour and power of invention, or there is Donizetti, whose *Don Pasquale* is delightful, or Auber, to whom Wagner conceded originality, or Offenbach, who is sometimes very funny. And these are dead enough. But Lortzing!

The best that his champion, Mr Naylor, who will soon conduct his opera, has to say for it is that it is a bracing musical comedy. It is not bracing, but it is a comedy, and of the quality of its music the less said the better; it is in point of wit inferior to Sullivan, [626] its nature is perhaps better explained if we think of the works of Sir Edward German. Those who like the music of *Tom Jones* will like this farce too. It is perhaps true that they constitute the majority of the patrons of opera, and Lortzing is quite innocuous and easy to understand; he is quite regularly played in Prussian opera houses, to relieve the overworked companies after the long strain of Mozart, or Verdi, or Wagner; in England *Peter the Shipwright* was performed sometime in the middle of the last century, had its mild success, and was forgotten. It is all singularly watery, and far too characterless to be anything but genteel, though a great comic actor might cause amusement even there. It is completely antiquated, more so than Weber, because it was written for the taste of the day by a man of meagre talent, who created nothing of permanent value (and indeed never pretended that he did), and whose name and works survived largely through a sentimental affection in which he, the primitive of musical

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comedy, is held by the less critical among his countrywomen. There is really no point in spending so much time on Lortzing; optimists will say, quite rightly, that the music is merry enough, and will go down quite well, even though the plot, which, in the case of music such as this, does matter, is singularly clumsy. We emphasise that though we are forced to condemn, we still cannot understand how the Opera Club, which certainly used to possess self-respect, came to this decision. It can be only a momentary lapse; it may remember the truly noble manner in which its foundations were laid, and be saved yet. We pray it may be so, and that this incident will come to be regarded as a curious misunderstanding. For we can conceive of no reasonable explanation.

We should like to apologise for the desultoriness, [627] incompleteness and lack of continuity of this chronicle; but musical activity in our University occurs piecemeal, and no survey of it can help reflecting this; we have at least tried to concentrate on the more significant fragments.

ALBERT ALFRED APRICOTT

## II

*Oxford Outlook* 11 no. 54 (March 1931), 49–53

The first important event of last term was the performance given by the Busch Quartet, and although one could not reasonably expect that the same level would be achieved for a second time during the same season either in Oxford or anywhere else, it was never completely lost sight of, and the music which followed was notably good.

The Busch Quartet possesses qualities which remove it from the range of easy comparison: these qualities are different in kind from the accumulated musical virtues of others, and appear to spring not from artistic accomplishment, nor even from depth of understanding, but from the participation of these in a very definite morel attitude on the part of the musician, a striving after an end which, in an uneasy metaphor, is disinterested, and is immediately known to be totally different from the aim of, say, the Léner Quartet, which is plainly to delight, or of the Amar-Hindemith Quartet with its passion for precise rhythm and transparent clarity (and both these have reached a kind of

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perfection, too); it is akin to what one must believe to have been the purpose of the composers whose music they play, a purpose which, though it may, by those who attach a personal meaning to these terms, be called religious or spiritual in character, is genuinely expressible by none of these terms. Whether any art can rise beyond a certain point without this mental attitude is a question to itself and here unfortunately irrelevant. In this case, at any rate, it does exist and gives to all its products a peculiar nobility which characterises them all equally and makes their uniqueness plain for all to feel.



*The Busch Quartet*

*Adolf Busch, Gosta Andreasson, violins; Karl Doktor, viola; Hermann Busch, cello*

When these musicians played Beethoven's posthumous Quartet in B Flat, at once there was created a sense of the going on of an event of the vastest possible immediate importance for all concerned, audience and [50] players alike; but what is more astonishing, the same almost happened again when the *Death and the Maiden* quartet came close to assuming the huge dimensions of some universal emotional crisis; one could hardly help reflecting on the unbridgeable gulf between this and the almost erotic performance of it given by the Léners a year ago. Adolf Busch

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himself is very largely responsible for this, as anyone who heard him play in the Beethoven concerto can testify. Besides him we know of only Casals and Schnabel as worthy to rank beside him in this respect. Joachim is said to have possessed the quality, and Busch himself prophesies that Menuhin will have it also. It would be interesting if someone possessed of sufficient knowledge and insight would apply himself to tracing the history of the parallel streams of 'pure' and of 'brilliant' musical tradition in the nineteenth century, especially among violinists; and would show the continuity of the austere, absorbed, 'academic' style side by side with the art of the virtuosi, with their lighter genius, from Paganini to Sarasate and from him to our own day, to Elman and Huberman and Kreisler, with their hotter, easier, more democratic flow of perfectly genuine emotion.

As for the recital given by Mr Harold Samuel, it was less good than it might have been, owing to an error committed by the organisers. It appears that the Oxford branch of the League of Nations Union, in support of which the concert was arranged, was offered alternative programmes by Mr Samuel, one of which consisted entirely or largely of Bach, the other of more or less popular tit-bits ranging from Bach to Ravel. The person or persons with whom the decision rested, in the sincere belief that the greater the variety, the more tastes would be satisfied, chose the latter, with the consequence that we were deprived [51] of an opportunity of hearing an interpretation of a single composer by a musician who has largely devoted himself to the study of that composer alone, and whose success in rendering his work no one disputes. And it must be remembered that the composer in question is not Chopin nor even Brahms, but Bach. As it was, the spirit was too greatly moved by the tantalising excerpts from that composer with which the programme wickedly began to be able to rest with any comfort on the charming romantic fancies with which he entertained himself, not very skilfully, for they were radically unsuited to his talent. But Mr Samuel will surely come again, and then he will play more music.

It seems unnecessary to repeat what everyone has with self-evident truth always been saying of Elisabeth Schumann, that if the quality of her voice equalled her artistry she would be easily the greatest singer of lieder in our generation. As it is, she serves her composers very nobly, not only Mozart, Schubert, Brahms and

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Strauss, but Mahler, whose songs deserve wider recognition, and who can rarely have been sung in England with anything approaching Mme Schumann's excellence. And this is always such that any intended criticism must, in the end, turn into pure appreciation. We are content to suffer the common fate.

Sir Thomas Beecham's concert was very exhilarating, very provocative, but, in the end, completely victorious. He always creates a brilliant atmosphere of bizarre, unexpected possibilities which heightens the effect of Korsakov, or even of Mozart, but is sometimes disturbing in Beethoven and Brahms. However, he is admirably obsessed by the essential unity of whatever he may be conducting, his view of it is one and synoptic, and the parts, as they progressively emerge, are never allowed to deflect attention to their private excellences, but are articulated with constant reference [52] to their place in and relation to the whole, which develops in and through them. There is a continual emphasising and sometimes over-emphasising of the contributoriness of individually beautiful sections – with the result that the second movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony in B Flat, for instance, while it lost none of its tender, gentle vagueness, was not allowed, as it too often has been, to flow along in a casual, meandering manner, but was so informed with integral character that one could fancy that all its subsequent development, its entire future pattern, could be implicitly heard in embryo from the beginning. By these signs, if by no other, is genuine greatness in a musician made manifest.

Towards the end of term Guilhermina Suggia gave a recital, and played with uncommon fire and breadth. In her style of playing, in her choice of music, in her personal appearance she expressed a most magnificent tradition, that of the artist who, with great pride and not without an inner struggle, condescends to share his experience with others, to let them gaze at his most intimate *Erlebnisse*. Actually Casals is, we believe, recognisedly a greater cellist. But neither he nor anyone else possesses her overweening pride in the aristocracy of her art, which makes her music, and her appearance while she plays it, blend into something very ardent and picturesque; Brahms profits hugely by all this, but Bach, whose fire is of a different kind, here grows perhaps too warm with southern passion.

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Meanwhile our own ditties were not mute, though the oat grows sometimes a little attenuated. Balliol provided an excellent programme played by the London String Quartet, and the Musical Club invited the Kutcher Quartet, some of whom helped Mr Goossens to play the Mozart Oboe Quartet in F so [53] well that there is no more to be said. And Mr Petri caused real excitement with piano excerpts from *Petroushka*. The most interesting meeting in some ways was that at which the Griller Quartet gave a provoking, but highly suggestive, rendering of Beethoven's Quartet in F (op. 135), a work of which no more can be said than that its effect is wholly inexpressible in words of any kind, and that to play it demands very great artistic courage from the performers.

The Musical Club has on the whole provided more interesting nights than dull, and for this we take occasion to record our gratitude.

As for the Opera Club and Lortzing, we allowed ourselves to comment somewhat broadly on it in the last issue of this journal, and excited criticism which, to say the least, was very lively. Herr Strohbach is unquestionably a great producer; the Opera Club proved itself competent in all respects, and deserved for its own sake, of not for Lortzing's, wider support.

What will be its next production? *Wozzeck*, we fully concede, is not to be thought of, nor indeed is *Cardillac*, nor even the most charming of all modern operas, Kodaly's *Háry János*. All these suggestions were thrown out only to indicate a general direction in which to move. For it is evident to anyone who saw its performance that the Opera Club can climb more perilous heights than those of light comedy, and to the former we beg that it may turn its ambitions. Then all the *Musikfreunde* in Oxford will once more be able to wish it success and help to promote it actively and without misgiving. May it remember this honourable means of exploiting all the potential enthusiasm for operatic music, which, we are certain, exists and deserves attention.

A.A.A.

*Oxford Outlook* 11 no. 55 (June 1931), 131–5

It is very pleasant to be able to give wholehearted praise, and, generally, pleasant to receive it; the former is the agreeable task which we find ourselves able to perform with regard to the Opera Club, whose choice of the opera to be produced next term is so wise and discriminating and altogether happy that we can only offer its authors our unqualified admiration. The opera selected is *A Night in May* by Rimsky-Korsakov, a generous and delicate work, full of the folklore of pagan Russia, with which Christian elements are quaintly interspersed; it closely follows the story which it dramatises, one of a cycle of Ukrainian tales by Nicholas Gogol, which are collectively called *Evenings at a Farmhouse near the Dikanka*.

The story is one of the most beautiful and poetically conceived in the language, and gave the composer an opportunity for indulging his growing fondness of picturesque paganism, as well as of paying homage to his beloved Gogol. When the opera was produced in 1880, Mussorgsky thought little of it, and César Cui reviewed it very coldly. But it survived its detractors, was recognised for a work of fine art, was performed in Germany, and finally reached London in 1914, when Diaghilev produced it at Covent Garden, with considerable cuts, which were evidently necessary. This is no place in which to discuss the quality of Rimsky-Korsakov's music (more especially as an essay devoted to this composer (a review by a more competent hand than ours will probably appear in the next issue of this journal), but we cannot refrain from affirming our belief that he was a composer of magnificent genius, and wrote the most perfect operas of his time. We hope that all those who claim to be concerned for music will realise that this imposes on them the duty of doing everything in their power to ensure the success of this excellent and original enterprise.

With these pleasant sentiments we may leave the Opera Club and turn to our recent past. The general background of last term's music was furnished by concerts in the Holywell Room and at Balliol, which preserved a level of solid goodness, or at least agreeableness. The high-water mark of the former was reached in

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the singing of Marietta and Martha Amstad and the playing of Alice Ehlers; the last, especially, played the harpsichord with wonderful skill and feeling; nothing like it had been heard since the now distant visit of Mme. Landowska. The most notable event at Balliol was Medtner's recital; but of this hereafter.

A pleasant concert was given by the Oxford Symphony Orchestra under Sir Richard Terry, Sir Hugh Allen and Mr Crawford McNair. The proceedings had a delightful village concert atmosphere about them; enthusiasm and amateurishness both ran high, and emerged with particular force in the fine, loud performance of Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Claviers and Orchestra, which was played in a manner which would have stirred the morosest spirit to active sympathy. A more notable achievement was the noble performance of the St Matthew Passion by the Oxford Bach Choir under Dr Harris. It was greatly improved since last summer, and does genuine honour to Oxford and to its conductor. But we hasten to the more unusual events of the term. These are the concerts given by Mr Anthony Bernard, by Medtner, and by the New Music Oxford Choir.

Mr Bernard conducted the London Chamber Orchestra in a curious potpourri of eighteenth-century and contemporary music. Fauré's overture to *Masques et Bergamasques*, with which it opened, is a charming piece of delicate, ephemeral music-making which is frequently played in France, where composers seem to have given themselves up to just such stylish trifling, with Vincent D'Indy as an almost solitary figure surviving from a nobler age. After this Bach's Fourth Brandenburg Concerto in G was played. It is, we maintain, fair to complain of Mr Bernard's performance that it was too faithful to the style of the eighteenth century; Mr Bernard conducted as one might conduct Rameau or Grétry, and within those limits conducted excellently; what we wish to urge is that since Bach has come to mean more to us than ever he meant to the men of his own day, he must be regarded in the light of the developments to which he led, of what took place long after his death, of all the implications of his music which our own age is so busy articulating. This, after all, is what interpreting means, to those, at any rate, who believe that works of art grow and reveal themselves in time. But on a static conception – and it is perfectly tenable – Mr Bernard's interpretation was more than justified; the concerto was played with great tact and sensibility, and one could

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almost see a roll of music for a baton in the conductor's elegantly moving hand; only the effect was perhaps, at times, a trifle bloodless.

This, too, was the occasion on which Oxford was introduced to Respighi's *Trittico Batticelliano*, and gained little thereby. Respighi was, it is true, taught by Rimsky-Korsakov, but he evidently remained impervious to the master's delicacy of feeling; for he shows none. He was given the palette to hold, and has laid on the paints in dense and glaring layers; the result is a piece of copious and singularly ineffective rhetoric, which is undoubtedly alive, but with a clumsy and coarse exuberance of its own, which vainly seeks to claim kinship with the most tender and sensitive among the great painters. Lambert's *Pomona*, which followed, was, at any rate, in better taste; it is agreeable, has wit, and is as unsubstantial as a piece of Poulenc. The programme ended with Peter Warlock and Josef Haydn. It was an interesting and stimulating concert.

The visit of Nicholas Medtner, who played his own works for the piano at Balliol, was an event of real importance. He is a composer who possesses authentic lyrical genius, who draws from the wells of Brahms and Grieg and Rubinstein, but never apes them, nor anyone else. Nothing so lovely and so full of individual character as his fairy tales has been written for the piano in this century, if we except Scriabin and the Spaniards. Medtner, with all his national qualities, is considerably more European and in line with the great tradition than de Falla, but they have in common an expressiveness, a power of immediate lyrical appeal, which makes them together the two purest, most romantic voices of our times.

The palm of originality goes to the New Music Oxford Choir, which, meeting at Lady Margaret Hall on a certain afternoon in March, ventured to give not only two performances of Krenek's *Die Fabreszeiten*, which proved to be a mediocre work, delicate and imaginative in places, but hardly even doing justice to Hölderlin's noble words, but in addition – and this is what is so astonishingly bold – *Der Lindberghflug* by Kurt Weill. This cantata, written for broadcasting by a young German composer, tells the story of the heroic enterprise in dramatic dialogue between the actors and witnesses of the event, sung to music which is partly 'pure', as, for example, in the aria sung by Sleep, and partly frankly imitative, as when the Engine speaks. The young gentlemen and ladies of the chorus – or at least some among them – made no attempt to

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conceal their amusement at the strange effects which Miss Francesca Allinson inspired them to produce, though the soloists – Lindbergh himself, baritone (representing in order the New York Wireless Station, Sleep, the American Newspapers, First Fisherman: a pronouncer on the unattainable) and bass (Second Fisherman: also a pronouncer on the unattainable) – sang their parts with wholly admirable gravity, and Mr Ian Glennie, who sang the hero's part, recited Lindbergh's thoughts (spoken passages with orchestra) with force and dignity, which, in view of the kind of words provided for him by their author, Bert Brecht, or perhaps by the translator, is a remarkable enough achievement. The effect of the work is that of a fantastic stunt, which leaves the hearer dubious and wondering whether a second hearing would convince him that here is something better than a mere provoking bizarrerie which sounds comic when earnestly intended, and whether Hindemithian tactics have not here been driven to a ludicrous *reductio ad absurdum*. He is left wondering these things, but if he is wise he will not decide until he has achieved closer acquaintance with the school and its methods.

Meanwhile we must pay a tribute of respect to Miss Allinson and her coadjutor for conceiving and bringing to fruition this bold experiment, which, whether it achieved success or not, revealed a musical aliveness and a fine independence of public opinion which, when genuine, is valuable in itself, even if it is manifested in some extravaganza perpetrated solely *pour épater les bourgeois*.

A.A.A.

## IV

*Oxford Outlook* 12 (1932), 61–5

With the sole exception of Sir Thomas Beecham's visit of last term, nothing more than usually stirring appears to have occurred; but the general level of performances has been so high that there is no good ground for complaint. In this connection I should like to put it on record that both the Music Club and Balliol have behaved with integrity and faithfulness to their ideals, and if, in their anxiety to avoid any hint of sensationalism, they may have allowed themselves to be drawn too far in the opposite direction of sober but somewhat flat and graminivorous good taste, yet the programmes were on the whole so agreeable that a considerable

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balance of pleasure was secured; there are occasions when a desire for Stravinsky or Bartók is met with Fauré and Dohnanyi, but such disappointments are obviously not serious. Both societies may be congratulated for continuing along their chosen paths.

As for more public events, the memory of Mr Hayes singing in summer rises dimly to the memory. So far as I can recollect he sang with great feeling and little taste, and so on the one hand dramatised and vulgarised the most lyrical Schubert, not, unfortunately, altogether beyond the limits of recognition, but was, on the other hand, most effective in *Danse Macabre*, whose violent, crude paints were reproduced with huge vehemence and proper dramatic power. As for his native spirituals, Mr Hayes sang them, it seemed to me, exactly as they are meant to be sung; my personal dislike of them is so great, however, that I am plainly not competent to say more about them.

Mr Harold Samuel is happily a frequent visitor and plays always with intelligence and depth. These qualities have made him the most distinguished exponent of Bach's keyboard music in England, and it [62] seems a pity that he should, on his Oxford visits, so largely abandon him in favour of other composers, Brahms and Debussy for instance, to whom his talent is far less suited. It is so rare to hear Bach played at all adequately that one cannot afford to let the few who do him justice to wander off to other shrines, there to worship in mediocre ways. Mr Samuel's musical past is such that one is within one's rights in demanding the luxury of a complete Bach recital from him. *La Fille aux cheveux de lin* may safely be left to others.

Mr Harold Bauer is a pianist of very different type: he is a romantic who in moments of genuine *Aufschwung* can be greatly moving. He gave a sensational performance of the *Sonata Appassionata*, violated rules, rode roughshod over the entire work, mowing down many delicate passages, and fused it into a most passionate and dramatic whole. This entailed distortion, and was on the whole not justifiable: it is one thing to play Liszt fiercely, and quite another to draw all that is thrilling, palpitating, breath-catching out of the *Appassionata* at the expense of depth. It *is* a passionate work, but the passion of Beethoven is not the passion of Berlioz; and it is idle to object that the alternative is the didactic dissection carried out by certain academic pianists, because one need only point to Mr Lamond, not to speak of Schnabel, to

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dismantle that thesis. After thus tampering with Beethoven, Mr Bauer gave a magnificent interpretation of Franck's Prelude, Chorale and Fugue. Those who, whether or not they recognise his genius, dislike Franck for the voluptuous mysticism, the organ loft and incense and decadent Madonna with whose spirit they find his works saturated, could not here complain of impurity in the conception of either the composer or the pianist. The whole, especially the [63] Fugue, was played with disciplined ardour and attention to the splendid architectonic quality, which revealed the genius of the work. It must have been so that Vincent D'Indy wished to hear it, any rate in middle life, before the austerities of his old age.

*A Night in May*, produced by the Oxford University Opera Club, was, on the whole, very delightful. The weakest point was the playing of the orchestra, which occasionally sank to desperate depths: but it was vigorously sung and acted; Korsakoff's music, though it nowhere rises to his highest level, was very agreeable, the *Spottlied* was excellently performed, and the whole was skilfully cut and abridged to reasonable length by Herr Strohbach and Mr Naylor. The production showed courage, enterprise and taste which do the Club great honour.

Sir Thomas Beecham's concert was an outstanding triumph. This, like all his programmes, possessed great breadth; the works played were assorted with an eye to bold contrasts. The *Hebrides* overture remains a lovely work, which, among reputable critics, Wagner alone despised, and the performance was almost faultless. The overture to *Prince Igor* was played with proper breadth and ampleness, but, curiously, without the big swinging rhythm which Sir Thomas himself used previously to give it, and which seems essential to it. Delius was handled tenderly, and was very touching. A symphony by Boccherini was played, and was, of course, quite agreeable. Its chief value seems to consist in its faithfulness to its period: it is not Haydn and not Mozart, but springs from a small very pure and attractive source of inspiration; perhaps it was his visit to Rome, or, it may be, his recent association with that essentially eighteenth-century orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic, [64] that made Sir Thomas feel affection towards the light and charming art of this Italian composer.

The *Eroica* symphony was given an incomparable performance. It was one of the performances which permanently colour the

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listener's conception of the work, and so becomes an event of the greatest personal importance. The obvious comparison is naturally with Toscanini, who, more than any other conductor of our time, possesses the gift of giving performances which are unique and seem authoritative for all time. Furtwängler has in this manner recreated the Sixth Symphony for our generation, and some would say that Sir Thomas himself had done as much for certain works of Handel. The performance of which I am speaking belongs to the productions of this exceedingly small musical aristocracy. Sir Thomas has this much in common with Toscanini, that he too does not see music as a horizontally expanding line composed of discrete sections, each of which presents separate problems and embodies separate values, enhanced, no doubt, by what precedes and follows, but nevertheless with an individual character of its own which must be brought out to contrast with the rest and then abandoned for the next event, which in its turn is born, grows and dies; but discovers a point of rest at the centre, as it were, of the musical gravity of the work, and thence builds up an organic structure not longitudinally but in all the dimensions, up and down and about, so that the work grows not from point to point but emerges as the concrete actualisation of a preconceived ideal plan, the significance of whose structure becomes more and more evident and arresting as it expands and is filled with content flowing out of the central source of energy, the single impulse from which alone the parts are seen to derive their existence and their value.

[65] And let me add this: synoptic survey is not enough; you can see a thing whole and remain outside it and be content to run through it steadily like a scale on a piano. What I am so awkwardly attempting to describe is the vision obtained by penetrating to that point within a work of art which is its point of balance, its root and its keystone, that point where alone what you identify with the composer's goal is borne upon you with new and irresistible conviction; what is eliminated is the sense of contingency, the view to which one is so often treated of a composition as a fascinating patchwork bound together by little more than mere temporal sequence; what is revealed to you, standing within, is the reason, the idea, the internal coherence of what is being expressed.

Music is ten times more *sui generis* than the other arts, and metaphors drawn from outside necessarily seem lame and

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insufficient. If, however, all these words even begin to suggest my meaning I am at last in a position to make my final point and ask whether it is not true that the difference between the second, what I may call the sculptural, and the first, or episodic, method is not also one of the obvious criteria of genius in an interpretative musician, and the exact measure of it, even if it is, in the ultimate analysis, seen not to be a definition of its essence.

I. B.

### V

*Oxford Outlook* 12 (1932), 133–8

During the last few months we have been visited by more musicians of genius and of talent than at any time during the past four years: Artur Schnabel, Josef Szigeti and Béla Bartók; and the Busch Quartet gave single performances, while the Léner Quartet in five concerts played the sixteen string quartets of Beethoven; this within the same six weeks. When this astonishing period came to an end one found oneself slightly bewildered by the sheer intensity and variety of music and musicians compressed into so brief an interval; but it remains a most remarkable and admirable experience.

I have paid homage both to Schnabel and to the Busch Quartet in these pages before. I have expressed my admiration in every way I know; by now their genius and their virtue need no advertisement. Those who are fortunate enough to hear them will, if they have ears, remember their experience as long as they remember anything, without the help of the gramophone; for without any doubt these artists reached the highest level of executive genius in music attained in our time; their methods are, however, so different that it may be interesting to dwell on this for some instant.

The Busch Quartet is for our generation what the Joachim Quartet was for the nineteenth century. The same ideal of absolute artistic incorruptibility, of unhesitating surrender to the composer, and finally of awareness of the value and dignity conferred by the work upon its executant, is the source of the peculiar greatness both of Joachim and Adolf Busch. What this meant in the case of actual performances by Joachim, I, who have not heard them, cannot know. What it means in the interpretation of the

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Beethoven Violin Concerto, anyone who heard the performance of it given by Adolf Busch will remember. The same [134] quality characterised the Oxford concert: it was almost the sole redeeming feature of the Reger Quartet (in E flat), a sincere and serious work, at times moving in virtue of these qualities alone, for it had no others. The Haydn Quartet (in F, op. 3) was lifted to its proper pinnacle of serene and placid beauty after its skilful and not wholly unattractive vulgarisation by the Léner Quartet. As for the Razumovsky Quartet in E minor (op. 59), it was played with breadth, freedom and nobility, which Léner is constitutionally not capable of achieving, for all his undoubted technical brilliance and genuine pursuit of the immediately ravishing in music.

The greatest asset of the Léner Quartet is the flawless discipline of its ensemble, which makes up (though the phrase is not a happy one) in technical efficiency what it loses in individuality. This mechanical simile is not arbitrary – its fitness is plain to anyone who compares them (and in view of their claims the comparison is not unfair) to the Busch, for apart from the vast intellectual and emotional distance which separates them, they are divided by something even more personal. One receives the immediate impression of the Busch Quartet as consisting of four free and distinct individuals, each with his own peculiar artistic attitude, which is distinguishable even while it contributes itself to the whole, each aware of the equal and independent rank of his instrument, which is allowed to rise to its full stature among the others; in the other case everything is surrendered to purchase symmetry and smoothness; the individual differences are not reconciled but eliminated, and the residue acquires an inevitable tinge of something passive and oppressed.

The only person who remains unbroken is Jenő Léner himself, who is too obviously responsible for [135] this system. He is a remarkably gifted musician who frequently – invariably to one's fresh surprise and consternation – sinks to sudden depths of slickly expressed sentimentality, in which the other players become involved. This would be quite unexceptionable if it occurred only in such items of the Léner repertoire as Tchaikovsky's *Andante cantabile*; but occurring when it does, on occasions which demand the greatest insight and sensitiveness, it leads to ruinous results. Occasions such as these marred what was undoubtedly a very notable achievement – a complete recital of the sixteen quartets.

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It is not frequently that anyone obtains the chance of hearing the whole series, and I wish therefore to put on record gratitude for this opportunity. Considered as a single achievement, there is surely no music which can claim equal status with it, either as music or as a constituent element of European culture; and since this is the case, no ordinary standards suffice in criticising a performance of it. Judged by the extraordinary standard implicit in the music itself, the Léner Quartet did not succeed, but it was not an ignoble failure. The six quartets op. 18 were played more than adequately. They are of very varying merit, and no generalisation can be concrete enough to have value. On the whole, the cool, fresh, early-morning romanticism of these quartets, especially of the enchanting Quartets in F and in C minor, was successfully conveyed.

Even these works, written when the composer was comparatively young, and more symbolic of the transition from one mind and century to another than any other contemporary art, at times rise to heights of which not a glimpse was hinted at by the players; but since these moments are comparatively rare, this does not weigh decisively against the superb skill which the Léner display on what may be called the purely empirical level. [136] The magnificent Razumovsky Quartets, the finest flowering of European romanticism, were played uneventfully, without originality or fire, without any genuine lyrical impulse, with energy in place of intense emotion, with smooth and seamless sinuousness for tender feeling, which almost brought about a successful illusion. The real collapse occurred where it might have been expected, over the posthumous quartets.

The Harp Quartet (op. 74) is evidently the outermost limit of this quartet's normal horizon: beyond that, complete uncertainty prevails. The strange and haunting quartet op. 95 was played by them with complete assurance and even blitheness: they found not a hint of mystery in it; all was clear as day. With the exception of the Grosse Fuge, which depends so much on technical accomplishment that it attracted and brought out the most finished playing of which the quartet is capable – which is saying a very great deal – the posthumous quartets were treated almost as though they had been written by a Saint-Saëns. The slow movements were played with much beauty of tone, which was, however, enormously outbalanced by a mixture of complacency

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and tawdry feeling more irritating than can be described. The first movement of the C Sharp Minor Quartet, the movement marked *Andante moderato e lusinghiero*, and the playing of the second and third movements of the A Minor Quartet, for instance, or the cavatina of the Quartet in B Flat Minor, were, to those who knew them, movements of sheer suffering. The swifter tempi were disfigured by exaggerated buoyancy, with which this quartet sometimes arms itself to withstand the frequent charge of effeminacy; the effect of this was a kind of forced liveliness, on the horror of which there is no need to dwell.

[137] And yet, after all deductions have been made, the performance of these works, which collectively mark the highest level to which chamber music, and indeed the romantic movement as a whole, has attained, the highest, one would like to add, to which it is conceivable that any movement or any individual could ever have attained, represents a public service on the part of the Léner Quartet more valuable than any other they could have performed: for their shortcomings they ought perhaps, at this stage of their career, no longer be held responsible.

I have been excessively long-winded about this matter, with the result that the initial reason for this disquisition – the discussion of the differences between Busch and Schnabel – was allowed to disappear altogether. It is too late to reopen the question: the thesis I intended to embroider consisted in the affirmation that whereas, in the case of Busch, as in the parallel case of Toscanini, the music is, as it were, allowed to play itself, there is no sense of deliberate choice between alternatives, of doctrine pressed home against encircling and eliminated possibilities, in the case of Schnabel the opposite occurs, the actuality which he develops moves forward in conscious opposition to the unrealised potentialities. In the first case there is no sense of conflict; the musical process of one of harmonious, natural, unquestioning self-revelation. What one admires is the nobility, the divine ingenuousness of treatment. With Schnabel, conflict arises at every stage. What one admires is the genius disclosed in each decision, each selected and asseverated element. The intellectual strain is much greater, the tension much severer, problems are presented and some are resolved, some not, but the urgency of all of them gives the whole process an aspect at once more tragic and more personal. This applies, of [138] course, primarily to Beethoven (it is

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absolutely true of the Diabelli variations, which Schnabel played here) and to a lesser extent to Schubert. To Mozart it does not apply at all. But I cannot enlarge upon this here.

The Bartók–Szigeti recital was extremely interesting. Bartók is one of the few genuinely original, genuinely creative composers alive in the present day. This recital was not representative enough to enable his audience to gauge his power. Such of his music as was played has a strong, tart, semi-barbaric character, gusts of violent feeling interspersed with patches of fierce, astringent wit. The piano is revealed as an instrument of percussion capable of yielding harsh and passionate discords the like of which have not been heard in Europe since the Mongol invasions. As for Josef Szigeti, tribute is due to his superb talent: if Busch continues the tradition of Joachim, Szigeti is within that other great tradition of the violin, the Paganini–Veniavsky–Sarasate tradition of the virtuosi of genius, of which Huberman is the greatest living representative. Szigeti played one of the Bach unaccompanied sonatas with the most ardent feeling, combined with remarkable attention to the lucid formal structure of the work, a taut and passionate discipline which never grew turbid and never grew cold, but held a proud and perilous course between the extremes into which violinists who play Bach continually fall. Of all violinists who recently played Bach in England, only Huberman and Szigeti rose beyond the temptation either to gush or to flirt and sparkle. It is doubtful how far this is generally recognised.

It was a most interesting, most engrossing term.

I.B.