

The Training of a Chorus. Some Practical Hints (Concluded)

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pen, obtains no more than a 'success of esteem,' is soon put upon the shelf, and practically forgotten. Of examples in the second of these categories no one in particular need be cited. They are numerous, and the reader can make his choice. But of those in the first and much shorter list, I cannot refuse to mention Coleridge-Taylor's 'Hiawatha,' than which no choral composition ever met with greater or more immediate success, or, let me add, was ever more deserving of such good fortune. How are we to account for the triumph of this and the failure of that? There must be some reason, apart from technical excellence, which often more fully appears on the side of the failure, some reason which gathers round the successful effort not so much the suffrages of the intellectual as the palpitating emotions which it is the main business of music to excite. To my mind, in the case of 'Hiawatha' that reason appears, not in the effect of its orchestration, but in the power of its simple and natural vocal melody—a power which so many modern composers, some by mistake of judgment, others to cover deficiency of melodic invention, practically despise and neglect. It is not only the simple and touching beauty of the phrases in 'Hiawatha' that 'infect' the hearer, but also their naturalness and truth. 'So must it be,' one thinks as the music goes on, 'so must it be, and in no other way!' The word is wedded to its pre-destined tone—this sort of marriage is also made in heaven—and the combined appeal cannot be resisted. A thousand other examples to be found in the records of musical art convey the same lesson and point to the same conclusion—namely, that the true and irresistible spirit of music is not found in the schools, does not lie in technical complications and elaborate developments (which only tend to smother it), but in utterances, often as simple as a folk-proverb, and, like that, forming part, ultimately, of individual and national life. When will the majestic 'Old Hundred' cease out of the land, or the Dead March in 'Saul,' or 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' or 'O rest in the Lord,' or a hundred other embodiments of musical expression such as cannot die?

Count Tolstoy very explicitly lays down the qualities which must exist in any true work of art. They are three, and first in order comes individuality, as to which our author says: 'The more individual the feeling transmitted, the more strongly does it act on the receiver; the more individual the state of soul into which he is transferred, the more pleasure does the receiver obtain, and therefore the more readily and strongly does he join in it.' The second quality is clearness of expression. This, says our author, 'assists infection, because the receiver who mingles in consciousness with the author, is the better satisfied the more clearly the feeling is transmitted.' Last, and greatest of all, comes sincerity. 'As soon as the spectator, hearer, or reader feels that the artist

is infected by his own production, and writes, sings, or plays for himself, and not merely to act on others, this mental condition of the artist infects the receiver.'

Here I put Tolstoy's book on my library shelf, conscious that there is much in it hard to be understood, harder still to accept, yet glad that I have read it, and, I hope, benefited to the extent of wider and also more definite views on the great subject of which it treats.

JOSEPH BENNETT.

THE TRAINING OF A CHORUS

SOME PRACTICAL HINTS

By HENRY COWARD

(Chorus-master of the Sheffield Festival Choir).

(Concluded from p. 383.)

WORDS.

THE most unsatisfactory part of the average choral performance is the slovenly way in which words are uttered. This is owing to the inertia of the muscles of the tongue and mouth. The dictum of St. James, about the tongue being an unruly member, is true also in another sense from that intended by the Apostle. The strong indisposition to work—better known by its real name, idleness—which causes the lips and tongue to sing with no more effort than in ordinary conversation, is the Giant Despair against which a conductor must wage war. Assuming that you get your choir to speak distinctly, then comes the difficult question of proper vowel sound. It is hard to convince even educated persons that, although they may speak correctly—with proper accent and proper vowel quantity—as soon as they begin to sing they oft-times alter the vowels in ways most ludicrous.

And is it at all wonderful that choristers should be deficient in this respect when, at every important concert, we hear singers with reputations singing 'moi' and 'thoi' for 'my' and 'thy'; 'thau' (very short vowel) for 'the'; when 'ow' as in 'now' is refined, or rather perverted, to 'o' as in 'know'; and when the vowels generally are maltreated for the purpose of some fancied gain in tone? Let me tell these singers that they fail in their object of winning admiration. The public are quick to note all subterfuges, and they soon discern between the true and the false. If they (the singers) only heard the remarks upon this 'make believe,' or incompetence, they would at once amend their ways.

INITIAL AND FINAL CONSONANTS.

In the training of a chorus the conductor should insist upon his singers *saying* their words apart from the music—he patterning the precise sound required, and then getting the same sound when sung to music. To do this is often very worrying and troublesome; but the living interest which these clear singing words give to

the pieces performed amply repays for all the work involved. The initial and final consonants are also sources of weakness in articulation, but these can be overcome by exercises similar to the following, which I have found to be most effective :—

- P. Please 'pay, pay, pay' promptly.
- B. Big Ben broke Bertha's bouncing ball.
- T. Try teaching to tax temper.
- D. Dear Dora danced delightfully.
- Th. Thin things think thick thoughts.
- Th. Thee they them these those.
- Ch. Church chaps chirp chants cheerfully.
- J. John Jones jumps jauntily.
- K. Kruger can't conquer Khaki.
- G. Guy gives good gifts gracefully.
- F. Fair flirts fancy French fashions.
- V. Vain Vernon vowed vengeance.
- M. Mild mannered men make money.
- N. Nellie never noticed Norah.
- R. Round rough rocks ragged rascals ran.
- L. Lion lilies like light.

These, of course, are only suggestive, but they have proved very useful.

EXPRESSION.

Expression calls for extended treatment, as upon this essential the success of choral singing largely depends. Expression is generally neglected because even moderate success is not achieved without considerable trouble. For instance, it is much easier to prepare four pieces in a 'rough and tumble,' though fairly accurate style, than to get up one with real finish. It also makes larger demands upon the nerve power of a conductor, even supposing that he has the mental grasp and poetic faculty to conceive the proper artistic interpretation of the music; and conductors, like other things in nature, take the line of least resistance—hence, beyond a perfunctory attention to '*p*' and '*f*,' they leave true expression severely alone. Many conductors fancy that they have merely to observe the common *pianos* and *fortes*, *crescendos* and *diminuendos* of a composition, and then they are sure of a good expressive performance. It is indeed something to be thankful for if a conductor will do even as much as this; but mere 'light and shade' is only one of many points that go to make 'expression' in choral singing. The mechanical *piano* and *forte* choirmaster becomes a mere bandmaster rather than a conductor.

The factors which go to make perfect expression in choral singing are Rhythm, Attack, Phrasing (of both words and music), Tone Colour of Voice, and balance between the essential or primary feature of the music, say in any one voice, and the incidental or secondary character of the music in the other voices.

RHYTHM.

The popular notion of rhythm is the giving of the strong accent at the beginning of every bar. This is perfectly true in theory, but if the

accents are struck remorselessly with metronomic regularity they get on one's nerves and produce an effect similar to that caused by the recurring jolt of the tramcar, or the whirr of machinery, which is typified in the well-known lines of Mark Twain:

Punch, brothers, punch, punch with care,
Punch in the presence of the pas-sen-ger.

But, although there is the greatest objection to this too obvious recurrence of the accents except in such pieces as the grand stirring chorus 'He gave them hailstones' ('Israel'), the presence of the accents must be heard throughout a piece so clearly that the rhythm, whatever it may be, is always in evidence, except when a temporary disturbance of it is purposely introduced. It is here that the skill of the conductor is made manifest. He will in some parts have the single bar rhythm, in other parts he will, by means of *crescendos* or *diminuendos*, get a two-bar, or three, or four-bar rhythm; delicate changes in the pattern of the dynamics of each bar will be introduced; nevertheless these and all the different points of expression should make the rhythm a central pivot upon which to turn, as for example in the following simple phrase :—



It is the absence of this sense of rhythm which makes many pianoforte recitals wearisome and causes much singing to lack point. This is probably due to two causes. First, the fact that as many choral conductors are organists, they have grown so accustomed to the lack of spring in the music they most frequently hear, that its absence does not strike them as it does the general public, who, though critical, are not analytical enough to hit upon the missing link. The second cause is the perverted taste of a number of neurotics, who cannot tolerate anything that is free, spontaneous, natural, and pellucid; decadents who say Handel is out of date, Mozart is puerile, Mendelssohn is insipid, and the glorious *Finale* to Beethoven's C minor Symphony unadulterated vulgarity. These morbid souls, who prefer the semi-darkness of a room lighted by tapers, shrouded with heavy red shades, to the glorious sunlight of God's heaven, try to impose their mediævalism upon music. And as these people always have the bump of 'Love of approbation' largely developed, they make no end of fuss by their 'posing and prating.' Like the fox who had lost his tail, they assure us that they are right and that everyone else is wrong. It is therefore necessary to assert plainly that

the boneless, invertebrate class of music which these people advocate is, as Charles Lamb said of poor relations, 'a well without water,' a cloud without rain; or, to quote still more powerful words, it is like 'salt that has lost its savour.' Therefore conductors must get rhythm; not the bald rigid thing which reminds one of an architect's plan, but poetical pulsations—*i.e.*, with the corners rounded off—accents with an 'atmosphere'—and if this is done successfully the chorus performed will come upon the critic with the freshness of a 'new drink' in the dog days. Quite recently I heard a mild-mannered lady asked how it was that she got her very determined husband to do just as she wanted. She said it was simply that she 'managed' him without letting him know that she did it. This is precisely what conductors and performers must do in regard to obtaining rhythm. They must 'manage' it without making the means employed, or the accents themselves appear too obvious; in fact, the successful attainment of artistic rhythm may be set down as a good example of 'Art concealing art.'

ATTACK.

Good attack is of such vital importance that if it be absent there is very small probability of the piece or the performance being tolerable, let alone pleasure giving. But the attack I refer to as being a factor in good expression is something more than the ordinary firm striking of the notes. It is the crisp, true, and forceful ejection of the notes sung so as to endow the sounds themselves with vitality, vehemence, and dramatic power, quite apart from the words, although the words often require this forceful treatment of the music.

The thrilling effect of this nerve-shaking shock can be well shown in such passages as the following:—

PARRY'S 'Job,' page 34.

A whirl - wind pass - ed o - ver it. . .

ELGAR'S 'King Olaf,' page 7.

I am the War God, I am the Thun - der - er.

Passages like the above could be multiplied indefinitely, but these must suffice. In connection with the second example, the effect of 'expression attack' was strikingly shown at the final rehearsal of the last Sheffield Festival.

A gentleman, whose name is a household word in Yorkshire through being in constant request as an adjudicator at choral competitions, was sitting in the balcony with a select few. When the chorus sang the 1st bar, with its test of attack in the *staccato* notes, he gave a slight start and looked at his score. The 2nd bar seemed to impress him still more. At the 3rd and 4th bars he seemed to quiver. At the words 'I am the Thunderer' (given above) he gave the book a bang with his closed fist, passed his fingers through his hair, turned to his colleague and said: 'Well! this beats all I have ever heard.'

PHRASING.

Quite a long chapter could be written under this heading, showing 'How to do it,' and, what would perhaps be more useful, 'How *not* to do it.' Under this division comes the management of light and shade, *piano* and *forte*, but used in such a way as to secure just proportion and contrast between the various sections of the composition. How these points are disregarded was recently illustrated at a performance in London of 'Ogladsome Light.' The chorus was commenced *mezzo-forte*, instead of *piano*. This would not have mattered much had it been done with the intention of securing a contrast at the repetition of the theme at the 14th bar. But no; instead of commencing this section *pp*, there was the same *mezzo* tone at a speed much too fast to bring out the devotional spirit of the words. Then when the climax was reached at 'We bless Thee' and 'Father omnipotent,' the increment of sound was small and the 'attack' so feeble that all interest in the piece evaporated, with the result that one got exasperation of mind instead of exaltation of spirit. There was no stirring outburst of power, no spirit searching *pianissimos*, no charm of contrasts—in fact, *there was no phrasing*.

As to what can be done by proper phrasing, one has only to recall the brightening effect of the *accelerando* with its subsequent *rallentando* to the normal *tempo* of the choral part of 'I waited for the Lord,' from bar 71 to the re-entry of the solo voices; the exquisite effect of the *ritardando* and *pianissimo* at the close of 'O pure in heart' ('Golden Legend'); the imposing dignity of the broadening out of the final phrase of the men's chorus at the end of the Prologue; and the overpowering majesty of the swell at the 13th bar from the end of the Epilogue of the same work.

Objection may be raised to these effects on the ground that they are not indicated in the score. The answer to this is: Composers at the time of writing do not always realise all the possibilities of their music, and after giving general directions, they leave their works to the tender mercies of the performers, and, moreover, it may be assumed that they reasonably expect that conductors will 'mix brains' with their methods of preparation.

PHRASING OF WORDS.

The diminishing sheets of paper allowed for this article warn me to be brief in my further remarks; therefore I will only give one example of the important part which the proper phrasing of words plays in giving point and virility to performances. It is taken from Saint-Saëns's 'Samson and Delilah,' at the point where the Philistine maidens are trying to bring *Samson* under the spell of *Delilah* (page 62):—

1st & 2nd SOPRANOS.
Lend us thy flame, thrill our hearts with feel-ing. &c.
1st & 2nd ALTOS.

As it stands above there is nothing very remarkable about the phrase; but cause the word 'flame' to be sung rather *staccato*, and 'thrill' with a pressure (\succ) upon it, taking care to get the initial consonant distinctly, and then note the difference. I have often heard it described as really 'thrilling' by those who have heard it performed in the manner I have indicated.

TONE COLOUR OF VOICE.

The points already passed in review are all more or less familiar; but that next to be considered never seems to have received any attention. Yet the tone colour of voice is destined to play a most important part in the choral singing of the future. 'The old order changeth,' and the whilom notion that words were merely pegs upon which to hang certain contrapuntal melodies is now a thing of the past. People are awaking to the fact that distinctness of words is of vital importance. And further, some few have realised that even mere distinctness of articulation is not sufficient to meet the artistic needs of perfect interpretation. These prophetic souls see that there must be appropriate shading of the voice—now bright, now sombre, now threatening, now persuasive—and not as in the past, even at our principal festivals, the same unemotional quality of tone. The tone may be full, grand, and sonorous, as at Leeds and Birmingham and at the Handel Festivals, but this will not suffice much longer.

Conductors will have to realise that above and beyond the words, there is the more important point of the thought expressed by the words, which merely form the shell, while the thought itself is the kernel. Recognising this they will not have to use the same quality of voice for 'Mary had a little lamb' and 'Stone him to death'; and they will take care that there is a difference in vocal colour between 'He watching over Israel' and 'Unbar the door, murderer.' I fairly laughed, as did a friend, when I heard the latter sung at the performance referred to above. The weak,

unconcerned manner in which the choir warbled the words 'Murderer, it shall not be too late,' was simply ludicrous. Such feebleosity would not have scared a tom-tit. Of the score of illustrations of this point which I should like to have given one or two must suffice:—

ORPHEUS. GLUCK'S 'Orpheus,' page 40.
Fu-ries, spec-tres, phan-toms ter-rif-ic.
SOPRANO & ALTO.
No! No! No!
TENOR & BASS.

The above passage does not at first sight appear to be particularly striking, but when the first 'No!' has been firmly sung, the second more emphatically, and the third uttered with the concentrated essence of nasality—*n-n-n-no*—the effect is overwhelmingly tremendous, there being no doubt left in the mind of the listener as to the negation of the Furies to the petition of *Orpheus*.

Other examples of effective use of tone colour are—

PARRY'S 'King Saul,' page 24.
Stay, . . . sis-ters!

Here delighted expectancy can be infused into the voices with splendid effect.

Terror and dismay can be typified in the following—

1st & 2nd SOPRANOS. PARRY'S 'King Saul,' page 120.
Save ye Da-vid! Save the sweet sing-er of Is-ra-el;
1st & 2nd ALTOS.

Only those who heard in rapid succession the tragic effect of—

S.A.T.B. IN UNISON.
There he fell dead.

and the sombre tone picture—

PARRY'S 'King Saul,' page 93.
In the hou-ses of Gath shall be mourn-ing,

and the vivid brightness of the succeeding phrases to the words

But the land of Judah shall be a land of rejoicing, can realise the entralling and inspiring effect produced by these contrasted tone tints, which made people feel sorry when the chorus was finished.

We may take it that however satisfactory in the past grand choral sonority may appear to have been, in the future something more will be looked for, because audiences will not be satisfied with that uniformity of tone which we usually associate with a German organist's rendering of a Bach fugue.

BALANCE BETWEEN THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PARTS OF A CHORUS.

I intended to enlarge upon this important feature of choral singing, but my space is more than exhausted; therefore I will only say that in every work performed the conductor should single out those phrases which ought to be brought into prominence, if only for one beat. 'O gladsome Light' furnishes a case in point. At the 8th bar the alto and treble parts should be treated so as to secure the effective imitation—

Musical notation for Soprano and Alto parts. The Soprano part is on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Alto part is on a bass clef staff with the same key signature. Both parts have lyrics: "Sa - cred and bless -". The Soprano part has a longer note value than the Alto part, creating an imitation effect.

In the following phrase (bars 10 and 11) the effect of getting the reply of the treble swell to the alto is also very fine—

Musical notation for Soprano and Alto parts. The Soprano part is on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat. The Alto part is on a bass clef staff with the same key signature. Both parts have lyrics: "Je - - sus". The Soprano part has a longer note value than the Alto part, creating an imitation effect.

The second minim in each bar of the tenor part should also be 'picked out.'

The tenor part from bars 52 to 58 is most notable and effective if treated as follows—

Musical notation for Tenor part. The Tenor part is on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are: "all times . . Of wor - ship and won - der!". The notation shows a series of notes with accents, indicating where the notes should be 'picked out'.

where the second, third, fourth, and the last three notes get prominence.

The three notes of the first bass in bar 62 are particularly effective, I might almost say thrilling, when 'brought out' with proper balance, clear and distinct, but not too heavy—

Musical notation for Bass part. The Bass part is on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are: "brought us,". The notation shows three notes with accents, indicating they should be 'brought out'.

while the term seraphic, heavenly, or, even better still, 'unutterable,' can be applied to the effect of the last nine bars of the chorus if the altos, tenors, and basses sing an ideal *pianissimo*, to form a sea of ultra-subdued harmony, upon which the ravishing melody of the sopranos—sung in the most dulcet tones—can float away, as it were, into eternity.

GENERAL HINTS.

As to the size of a choir, I say the bigger the better; but a good working basis is for a choir to occupy about twenty per cent. of the seating capacity of the concert hall. Of course, if one cannot get so many singers, a smaller proportion must do. With respect to the proportion of parts, I prefer the basis to be: twenty-two sopranos, twenty altos, nineteen tenors, and twenty-one basses. I like a bright sky and a firm foundation.

To the capital closing hints offered by Mr. F. H. Cowen, on Conducting, in his pregnant article which appeared in the May issue of THE MUSICAL TIMES, I would add, conduct as much as you can with the eye. A look towards a part—each member of which takes it for granted that he or she *must* be looking at the conductor—I find is more potent than any other sign, as it seems to establish perfect sympathy between the performer and the conductor.

Many other points, such as how to sing a fugue, a part-song, the development of good tone, &c., must be held over until a more convenient season.

SAMUEL SEBASTIAN WESLEY.

(Concluded from page 374.)

A LOST ANTHEM AND 'ASCRIBE.'

THE year 1854 was an active one for Wesley and not without some importance in regard to Winchester Cathedral. Upon his advice the Dean and Chapter purchased 'about three-fourths' of Father Willis's fine organ in the Great Exhibition, which was completely rebuilt for its new location. The instrument was formally opened on June 3, when, at Evensong (at 1 p.m.), S. Wesley in F was sung in addition to the following anthems, performed consecutively—'O give thanks,' Purcell; 'Ascribe unto the Lord' and 'The Wilderness,' S. S. Wesley. 'A new anthem, composed for the occasion,' a setting of the words 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made,' by Dr. Wesley, was announced to be performed 'after the Thanksgiving'; but there is no evidence of its having been sung on that occasion, or even of its existence. Wesley was probably dissatisfied with his attempt, and therefore relinquished the idea and destroyed what he had already written. Among a strong contingent of singers from various cathedrals gathered together on that occasion was Master John Stainer, aged thirteen, then a chorister of St. Paul's Cathedral. Sir John, in recalling the incident at this distance of forty-six years, says in regard to 'Ascribe unto the Lord':—

'At the rehearsal in the Cathedral, Wesley could not get the combined choirs to take the movement "As for the gods of the heathen" rapidly enough. So he came down into the body of the church, leaving one of his assistants (probably Garrett) to play and