

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

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“HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING.”

CHARLES WESLEY'S Christmas hymn, “Hark! the herald angels sing,” has become so closely associated with Mendelssohn's music that it may be interesting to refer to it, especially in the light of some fresh information. The tune is that of No. 2 (“The Lied”) of Mendelssohn's “Festgesang,” for male voices and brass instruments, and was sung in the open air at Leipzig, June 24, 1840, in celebration of the Gutenberg Festival, for which the work was composed. Mendelssohn afterwards arranged it for mixed voices at the request of his English publisher. The adaptation to Charles Wesley's words was made more than forty years ago by Mr. William H. Cummings, then the obscure young organist of Waltham Abbey, but now the Principal of the Guildhall School of Music. Mr. Cummings informs us that he eagerly procured everything that Mendelssohn composed as soon as it was published. While playing over the chorus in G he was at once struck by its adaptability to the words “Hark! the herald angels sing.” He copied out the parts, and the tune was sung with great enthusiasm by the congregation at Waltham Abbey. He soon afterwards began to receive so many applications for manuscript copies that he took his arrangement to Messrs. Ewer and Co., who published it in 1856. Its earliest appearance in a hymnal was, we believe, in “Hymns Ancient and Modern” (1861), where, as Mr. Cummings justly says, an unwarrantable alteration has been made in the melody by the introduction of a B at the third beat of bar twelve which Mendelssohn did not write. Editors of subsequent hymnals, trusting to the infallibility of “Hymns Ancient and Modern,” have not only copied this mistake, but, like the musical editor of “Hymns Ancient and Modern,” have neglected to make any mention of Mr. Cummings's name as the arranger of this popular Christmas hymn.

But we happen to have in our possession a letter of Mendelssohn's, hitherto unpublished, written to his English publisher, Mr. E. Buxton, the former proprietor of Ewer and Co., on this subject, an extract from which we think will be read with interest. The letter, dated “Leipzig: 30 April, 1843,” and in Mendelssohn's own English, is on the subject of a translation, by Mr. Bartholomew, of the “Festgesang”:

... Then I must repeat the wish I already expressed in my letter to Mr. Bartholomew. I think there ought to be other words [than those written by Bartholomew] to No. 2, the “Lied.” If the right ones are hit at, I am sure that piece will be liked very much by the singers and the hearers, but it will *never* do to sacred words. There must be a national and merry subject found out, something to which the soldierlike and buxom motion of the piece has some relation, and the words must express something gay and popular, as the music tries to do it.

Mendelssohn's use of the terms “national and merry subject” and “soldierlike and buxom motion” is interesting in connection

with the present associations of the tune. In justice to Mr. Cummings, however, it must be said that he had no idea of Mendelssohn's views on the matter; and, with all due respect to the composer's opinion that it would “*never* do to sacred words,” everyone must admit that the adaptation is an exceedingly happy and appropriate one.

A CLOSE-CONNECTING link with Mendelssohn has been severed by the death of his elder daughter and second child, Mrs. Marie Benecke, which, we much regret to record, took place after a few hours' illness at her residence, Norfolk Lodge, Barnet, on October 28. Mrs. Benecke was born at Leipzig, October 2, 1839, and although she was only eight years old when her distinguished father died, she retained a vivid recollection of his sunny home-life. There is a characteristic reference to her in his letter of January 29, 1845, written when she was only five years old, in which he says: “Marie is learning the scale of C, and even that I have actually forgotten to play, for I have taught her to pass her thumb under the wrong finger!” Since 1860, the year of her marriage to Mr. Charles Victor Benecke, Mendelssohn's daughter has been resident in England, and the reputation of her father in the country he loved so dearly was very precious to her. She took the greatest interest in all that appertained to him, and was always ready to give information in regard to his life and works. In this connection we may mention that she was the channel through which the business arrangements were made by Messrs. Novello, Ewer and Co., when they published Mendelssohn's Eighth book of the “Songs without Words,” the “Reformation” Symphony, the “Cornelius” March, and other posthumous works. Her interesting collection of mementoes of her father, especially his clever drawings of English and Scotch scenes, she reverently treasured. Two years ago Mrs. Benecke was sorely stricken by the terribly sad loss of her younger son, Edward Felix Mendelssohn Benecke, a distinguished Oxford scholar of the greatest promise, who mysteriously disappeared on the Alps, and whose body has never been recovered. The shadow of this calamity darkened her naturally smiling face, and, although ever cheerful and resigned, only death could give her that “perfect peace” which she failed to experience while here on earth. The remains of Mrs. Benecke were laid to rest, in brilliant sunshine, in the village churchyard of South Mimms, near St. Albans, on the 2nd ult., two days before the fiftieth anniversary of her father's death. The funeral was of a private nature, the family circle including Mrs. Wach, of Leipzig, Mendelssohn's younger daughter and now only surviving child. Amongst the personal friends present were Sir George Grove, Mr. Gerald Callcott Horsley, and Mr. F. G. Edwards, the last-named also representing Messrs. Novello and Co. Mrs. Benecke's surviving children are Mr. Paul Victor Mendelssohn Benecke, Fellow and Tutor of Magdalen College, Oxford, and the Misses Else and Margaret Benecke.

It is not our intention to discuss the *pros* and *cons* of the recent libel case, Fry *v.* Runciman, and certainly we shall say nothing impugning the verdict and judgment. We prefer to gather from the whole matter such lessons as it affords; especially to point out its bearing upon a certain practice of criticism (?) originally imported from the United States, where the spice of journalism is personalities. It is