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JOHN IRELAND

By EDWIN EVANS

FOR the student of modern British music a peculiar interest attaches to the composers who were born in the seventies and early eighties. They do not stand for the dawn of the present "Risorgimento." They came later than that. But they came early enough to suffer, at least in their student years, from the disadvantages of the old régime, and few of them suffered meekly. They were a precocious generation and, whether their musical bias was orthodox or subversive, they were highly proficient, and impatient to plunge into creative work.

There were some prolific years which inspired sympathetic onlookers with such enthusiasm that they began to look upon the battle of English music as already won. This enthusiasm, which one may date at the beginning of the century, was premature, and already some of the men who were then hailed as deliverers are looking back upon their best work and upon the future that we then thought lay before them. They exorcised some of the devils that beset English music, but their ranks have been thinned by the demon of facility, and now, out of a score of names, perhaps some half dozen will occur to us as having escaped the dangers of success too easily achieved. Nor are they, generally speaking the names which provoked the greatest enthusiasm a dozen years ago.

Fortunately for himself John Ireland was not one of the brilliant young men of that heroic age. He did not plunge into his future when still a student. He stepped very gingerly into it with much searching and questioning of the spirit, of which there is ample trace in his work, for those who read beyond the notes. He never possessed the assurance that comes of facility, and there was no outpouring of prematurely born masterpieces. It was not the skill that was lacking. He could have assimilated, as did many others of his day, the modern resources with which efforts are made, but he was hampered with a conscience that compelled him to write nothing that did not correspond to what he felt and thought. It *is* rather a hampering conscience that stops one from saying a clever thing because one is not sure that one believes in it. Were it more general, the output of music would be considerably lessened. Artistic sincerity is not the quality most frequently apparent in modern music. The possession of it may even make



John Ireland

John Ireland seem a little "old-fashioned"—using the term with the affectionate tinge that clings to it—but, be that as it may, John Ireland is unquestionably one of the sincerest tone-poets of our day, and one of the most scrupulous. Moreover, it is his sincerity that is the reason why recognition came slowly. Had he been disposed to make concessions he would doubtless have met with an earlier reward, but he judges himself so severely that he casts aside all that he wrote before 1908, when he had arrived at an age when it is fashionable to be celebrated. These discarded works are numerous, and not unimportant, but we will respect his wishes by ignoring even the few of them that have found their way into print.

His career begins thus at his twenty-ninth year, for he was born August 13th, 1879, at Inglewood, Bowdon, Cheshire. His father was a literary man who enjoyed the friendship of such men as Leigh Hunt, Emerson and Carlyle, and edited the *Manchester Examiner and Times*. The family hailed on his side from Fife-shire and on the mother's from Cumberland—a Northern origin that may not be irrelevant to the ruggedness of John Ireland's best work. He studied at the Royal College of Music and was a pupil of Sir Charles Stanford for composition. His studentship came to an end in 1901, but, just as Vincent d'Indy makes a distinction between learning the composer's "métier" and his art, he served another six or seven years' apprenticeship to a master more stern than any teacher: his own fastidiousness. Judging from the first works that followed, the difficulty with which he had to contend was one that is not uncommon in the experience of modern composers. His musical thought was, not only by training, but constitutionally, if one may use the word, severely diatonic. The loose chromatic writing that justifies itself empirically, or by impressionism, did not fit into his scheme of things. Yet he is a modern of the moderns, and a rich harmonic texture is indispensable to him. The gulf between the simplicity of his structure and the richness of the texture in which he clothed it was one that his thematic material had to bridge somehow, and, being too much of an artist to grasp at the first superficially adequate expedient that presented itself, he was a long time solving his own particular problem. In fact, one might say that he never completely solved it until 1916, when the A Minor Sonata at last stamped him as a mature writer of the foremost rank.

Meanwhile he had written a number of important works. After the "discarded" compositions (which, by the way, included two Violin sonatas) the first to appear was a "Phantasy-Trio" in

A minor, due, like so many other works in this form, to the initiative of Mr. W. W. Cobbett. This was followed in 1909 by the Violin sonata (No. 1) in D minor; and, a year later, by a song-cycle, "Songs of a Wayfarer," of unequal merit but containing at least one song worthy to rank with its successors. The best of this music is contained in the sonata, which, although not of sufficiently assertive character to make an immediate sensation such as followed the appearance of the A minor, has qualities of a more intimate kind which cause it to retain its freshness unimpaired. For the present it is somewhat overshadowed, but, in the revised edition recently published, it should attain to repertory rank so soon as the A minor sonata ceases to be the "very latest." Regarded together, these three works constitute, as it were, the threshold of the most prolific period of John Ireland's work, from which they are separated by a brief pause, for 1913 is the date inscribed on his next compositions. Doubtless, however, some of them were in preparation.

That year saw the production of four very characteristic compositions: a prelude, "The Forgotten Rite," for orchestra; a set of piano pieces, "Decorations"; a song-cycle, "Marigold"; and a separate song, "Sea-Fever." In all these is unmistakable maturity, and in each the composer shows himself in some new aspect; in "The Forgotten Rite" he reveals a naturalistic tendency far removed from the realism of composers who wax lyrical over the coming of Spring. It is the message of a man who feels nature too deeply to "make a song of it" and yet sings in a subtle idiom that is, as it were, esoterically lyrical. It is a mood to which we owe much of Ireland's later music, notably the fine rhapsody "Earth's Call" for contralto and piano. The "Decorations" belong to another phase of his art, to which the title supplies the key. The literary suggestions—two from Arthur Symons and one from Arthur Machen's fantastic book "The House of Souls"—are treated decoratively. The first of them, "The Island Spell," has become popular, but the second, "Moon-Glade," has a more subtle beauty. The third, "The Scarlet Ceremonies," is less elusive and more vivid, but not more seductive.

The two vocal works of 1913 again present contrasted aspects. The setting of Masfield's "Sea-Fever," which is perhaps the most frequently heard of John Ireland's compositions, is simple and direct—the forerunner in this respect of "The Soldier," "The Cost," and of that exquisite lyric "The Heart's Desire." "Marigold," on the other hand, belongs to the rich vein that leads to the "Sylvan Rhapsody." It comprises three songs: two settings of Rossetti,

“Youth’s Spring Tribute” and “Penumbra,” and one of a Dowson translation of Verlaine’s “Spleen.” The last is woven round a phrase so characteristic that, but for its unusually disturbed tonality, it might almost serve as a motto to Ireland’s collected works. As a whole, the cycle is one of his most remarkable compositions, though it may perhaps be slower to attain to general acceptance than the succession of songs of which “Sea-Fever” is the type and whose appeal is more primitive.

The next important work is a trio in E minor for piano, violin and ’cello, a work at present unpublished, in which the composer seems to take a definite farewell of his earlier self, for it has phrases that might serve as connecting-links with his period of struggle for freedom in self-expression, and others which predict the complete emancipation of the later Sonata. Through its three movements runs a vein of connected inspiration which seems to reach its loftiest point in the introduction to the finale.

The year 1915 produced a “Rhapsody” for piano and a setting of Rupert Brooke’s famous sonnet “The Soldier.” The “Rhapsody,” an uncompromising piece of work in which the “rugged honesty” of John Ireland’s lyricism is perhaps more completely expressed than elsewhere, has, perhaps for that very reason, had to wait out of its turn for full recognition. Austerity is a quality that does not meet with quick appreciation from recital audiences—or, indeed, from pianists—unless it happens to be signed with a magic name that begins with B. But “airs and graces” would have been lamentably out of place in it. In fact they would sit ill upon most of John Ireland’s work. That is what constitutes its greatest attraction, for it is not an everyday musical experience to come across a personal revelation so devoid of subterfuge. The setting of a sonnet invariably confronts the composer with a problem, for the shape of the poem is not an easy one to adapt to musical ends. The Rossetti sonnets which Ireland has included in “Songs of a Wayfarer” and “Marigold”—the second of which is formally far the better—are examples of this. In “The Soldier” he relies upon the intensity of meaning, expressed in the simplest of terms, rather than upon the actual form of the sonnet, deeming the soldier-poet’s message of greater importance than the literary rôle of the sestet, for which he is content to draw upon the musical phrases of the octave. Yet it would be difficult to imagine a more effective setting, and one that adhered more faithfully to the form might have missed the substance.

This was the first of a small group of songs inspired by the war. Two others are bracketed under one title, “The Cost.” In

the first of these, "Blind," the composer has reached a degree of poignancy that is almost painful. One has to go back to Moussorgsky to find anything equally magnetic. In "Savincha" and in some songs dealing with the peasant, the Russian composer, though hampered by technical shortcomings, attained to a tragic grandeur that has rightly been regarded as his loftiest vein. Here we have its English counterpart. Truthful, unadorned, and thus the more touching, is this simple, irresistibly appealing version of Eric Cooper's poem. In comparison the second song, with an unavoidable note of melodrama, is almost an anti-climax—but not unneeded to relieve the emotional tension.

These songs were an outward indication—or rather an indication prompted from without—that the events of these stirring times were clamouring for musical expression, not indeed in their external aspect, but through the channel of those deeper, as yet scarcely avowed emotions which they have aroused in the more sentient of our people. Is it going too far to look upon the violin Sonata in A minor as an expression of these emotions? That is as it may be, but it is at this date the most consummate work John Ireland has given us, and if the much maligned British public rose to the occasion, as it did beyond all question, it is at least permissible to believe that the music struck some latent chord of sentiment that had been waiting for the sympathetic voice to make it articulate. Never in the recent annals of British chamber-music has success been so immediate. The press was practically unanimous, and within a short time violinists, who as a rule do not fly to new works, found that this sonata, for their credit's sake, must be included in their repertoire. One feature of this success must be mentioned: a British work was actually included in our programmes not as a make-weight, or as a duty-task, but as the chief attraction from the box-office point of view, a position hitherto reserved for standard classics. It was indeed an excellent omen for the future. The sonata is in three movements which one might term respectively dramatic, lyrical, and a relaxation of the prevailing tension. The first section with its rugged vigour strikes a serious note, but its gravity is strikingly free from elements of questioning or of even momentary despondency, and if one quality more than other accounts for the spontaneously receptive attitude of the musical public from the first note, it is: confidence. It is the music of a man who feels deeply but who is sustained by confidence, not necessarily in the outward shapings of destiny, but in that ultimate faithfulness of events which is the creed of men of good understanding. The

slow movement, which maintains the same high level of sane idealism, is concerned with lyrical solace. "Even the humour of the last section gathers a flavour of the heroic from the context, much as the fun of our soldiers gathers it from their hardships."¹ The sonata is, in short, a worthy expression of the times that gave it birth, and one of the few great works of art hitherto resulting from the underlying impulses of to-day.

Another, almost equally important contribution to recent chamber-music, is the one-movement Trio in E minor for piano, violin and 'cello, not to be confused with the earlier, more extended, work in the same key. It was written in the spring of 1917, and bears the impress of the grim contrast between the season and the wastage of war at the very springtime of life. Here the atmosphere is more martial and one might suspect a glorification of the "panache" did not a touch of bitter emphasis remind one of the tragic futility that has overtaken the glitter of the armies of the past. One feels an element of rancour in the psychology of the work, yet it is not the morbid resentment of the weak, but the angry impatience that every one must feel who has not despaired of civilization. It is a poem of mixed emotions inspired by an attitude more critical than that of the sonata and expressing itself with more directness, though in terms into which one may read a note of sarcasm if one likes. The form is simple: a strain of thematic material progressively metamorphosed in the manner of free variations.

During the four years occupied with these various works a number of piano pieces were evolving towards completion, four of which are now grouped as "Preludes." The first, which is dated January, 1914, is entitled "The Undertone," and consists of a two-bar phrase treated as an "ostinato" with great harmonic variety but consistently in one definite mood. In its way it is a miniature *tour de force*. The second, "Obsession," might have been suggested by Edgar Allan Poe, or by the counsels of a witch's familiar. The mood it expresses is an evil one which most people prefer to fight or to throw off. One way of getting rid of it is to express it, just as one can be rid of an unwelcome train of thought by committing it to paper. This is what Ireland has done with singular felicity, if the word may be used in this connection. The third, dated Christmas, 1913, bears for title "The Holy Boy," and is almost like a carol in its naïve and simple charm, which is akin to that of some of the more direct songs, "Sea-Fever" or "The Heart's

¹*Pall Mall Gazette*, 7th March, 1917

Desire." The fourth prelude, "Fire of Spring," is a rhapsodical outburst the motive of which is sufficiently explained in the title.

Then followed the two "London Pieces," labelled "Chelsea Reach" and "Ragamuffin." These might be variously described as Cockney grave and gay, or excursions into the vernacular. The first is not a picture but a reverie in which the sentimental side of the Londoner—the side that takes "ballads" seriously—comes uppermost. This somewhat ingenuous sentiment being thoroughly honest in its unsophisticated way, deserves to be treated kindly and without irony, for the sake of its sincerity, and where the inevitable sugar seemed excessive the composer has used his harmonic skill to preserve the real flavour. It is a paradox in musical psychology, and an engrossing one. The "Ragamuffin," with his blatant animal spirits, is a welcome counter-irritant, and the two pieces should invariably be played together, lest the sentiment of the first should be taken too literally.

The last compositions issued include a song, "The Heart's Desire," which is a setting of the "March" poem in A. E. Housman's "A Shropshire Lad," and one of the most sympathetic musical versions inspired by that famous volume of lyrics; another a setting of Rupert Brooke: "Blow Out, you Bugles"; and finally "Earth's Call," the sylvan rhapsody for contralto and piano referred to above, which is too ambitious in design to be adequately described as a song, although its text, like that of many of John Ireland's songs, is a sonnet, this time of Harold Monro. It is in the naturalistic mood of "The Forgotten Rite," though much more directly assertive, and the manner is the more complex of the two into which all the composer's vocal works can be classed. "Earth's Call" demands great powers of interpretation on the part of the singer, for it is music writ large, but although not easy of access the reward is correspondingly great. There is a dearth in the repertoire of compositions ranging in length and calibre between the ordinary song and the dramatic scena. Apart from its great merits here is another reason for welcoming it.

We have arrived at the end of this survey, too brief to be adequate, of ten years' work of one of the most remarkable of present-day composers. It should be noted that although the importance of the compositions has varied, their honesty of purpose has not, for there is not one in this comprehensive list that is not the outcome of the need of the artist to express himself—not one that is either a concession to a taste more vulgar than his own, or an attempt to set commercial before artistic considerations. The probity of musicians and their sense of responsibility towards

the art they serve has seldom been so completely proof against temptation to "make an effect," or to secure an easy material benefit. This probity is associated in John Ireland with a fervid sincerity and love of artistic truth that will tolerate no meretricious blandishments, and a scrupulousness that rejects anything that is arbitrary or fortuitous. Thoroughly English in his outlook and in the directness of his method, he has one point of contact with the French, and one only, in the meticulous care which he devotes to detail. His is no feverish productivity. He never will be, as many composers have been, the victim of a fatal facility. He is content to spend days on a single passage, so that he give it the one ultimate form which will afterwards prove to be the inevitable form it should take. Yet this constant preoccupation with precision in detail has nowhere resulted in laboured writing. His harmonic texture may be complex or simple, suave or acrid, smooth, or, as it is more often, rugged and sharply defined, but it is constantly adjusted to the needs of the composition, and, although he is not given to finicalities, his taste in these matters is no less acute than that of those who trade in them—over all of which, rightly understood, it is in the end one quality that predominates: sincerity.