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Author(s): Edwin Evans

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MODERN BRITISH COMPOSERS.

BY EDWIN EVANS.

V.—JOHN IRELAND.

One of the most remarkable features in modern British music is that its creators do not group themselves into anything resembling a school or even a party-system. In Russia the dividing line between nationalists and eclectics is still discernible, though it has become less sharply defined. In France all music that is not purely academic, and much that is, can be referred back to the Franckist movement on the one side, or to the Impressionist movement on the other. Here in England it is only the composers who do not matter that can be grouped into a school. Take, for instance, the many musicians who have graduated at the Royal College of Music. Where is the common denominator between Vaughan Williams and Frank Bridge, or between Holst and John Ireland, or between Goossens and Herbert Howells? It is only among those whose timidity keeps them within the narrow path of Brahmsian virtue that one can find the elements of a school. The others can at best be classified by technical distinctions, such as, for example, the respect they do or do not pay to those great diatonic principles which continue their authority as robustly as ever, refusing to give place to modern chromaticism. But there is no real antagonism between parties thus divided, for each has a full right to independent existence which neither wishes to impugn. There is nowhere any sign of such exclusiveness as prevails, for example, at the Schola Cantorum in Paris, where even social intercourse with heretics was at one time discouraged. On the contrary, within recent years there has grown up among our composers a feeling of kinship that seems likely to put an end to the old reproach that the art of sweet concord was productive of more personal discord than any other practised by man. Nowadays, even critics agree to differ with mutual esteem and cordiality.

The foregoing remarks may seem irrelevant to the consideration of John Ireland as a composer, but in reality they indicate the background against which such individualities as his detach themselves with more or less rapidity and precision, according to their dominant traits. It is impossible to deal adequately with any of the composers of his generation, that is to say those born, roughly speaking, between 1870 and 1885, without bearing in mind that they belong to a phase of British music in which the stage was full, and perhaps even overcrowded. Such conditions are conducive to a kind of feverish activity constantly threatened with the dangers of over-production. Looking back from our present point of vantage, we are sometimes driven to the conclusion that the coming of age of those composers might have had even better results for us if the activity had been less, or if music paper had been rationed. But the end of our musical stagnation was so welcome to us, that

we were only too ready to accept as achievements compositions showing no more than promise that has in some cases remained unfulfilled. Our attitude of friendly expectancy was almost bound to weaken the disciplinary self-criticism of the composers concerned. The fault was ours rather than theirs, and the best we can say for it is that it was a fault on the right side; but it is precisely this that places the personality of John Ireland in high relief, for, if he was long in attaining the eminence which commands the respect of his fellow-musicians, it was chiefly because in him the faculty of self-criticism was unusually robust. So far from there being any danger of his succumbing to the prevailing tendency towards too facile production, there was even a risk of his severe self-judgment making him almost inarticulate. It has often been stated that he now rejects as immature all that he wrote prior to 1908, but it would be more correct to date the rejection back, for he passed this verdict upon each work in turn almost as soon as it was written. Yet the only difference between these early compositions and the contemporary output of his peers is that he was conscious of the difficulties before him, whilst they, in many instances, came to realise them later.

To understand those difficulties it is necessary once more to touch upon contemporary musical evolution. Ireland had to solve the eternal equation between the old and the new, and he was retarded by an austere conscience that set him firmly against either compromise or self-delusion. He could not emulate the Tory undergraduate who proclaims himself a socialist and really believes he is one. Not only were the principles bequeathed from the 16th century sacred to him as such, but they were part of his very nature, and it was as difficult for him to disguise them with modern elaboration as it would have been to sin against them. But to breathe into them the spirit of the times, without resorting to artifice, is no easy matter. He was not content to erect a diatonic structure and surround it with a cloud of notes. The result would have been too flimsy for his rigid taste. In addition to this, the character of his melodic invention had a sturdiness that confirmed him in his rejection of mere expediency. There was thus at the outset an acute divergence between the texture and the pattern of his music, for his modern ear demanded a richness that seemed for a long time to be foreign to his musical thought. The contradiction was however only apparent, as he himself was well aware, and the task before him was in the main one of reconciliation without compromise. The measure of his present success is that he has completely reconciled matter with manner, and has not compromised with principle. How much is implied by that only the closest observers of modern music can tell.

The conscientiousness with which he engaged in this struggle towards a definite end is the key-note of his character as a musician. His probity is practically unrivalled. He remains as alert as ever for the detection of any hiatus in his style,

and more than one manuscript is even now detained on suspicion. Such honesty as this, in the ordinary ways of life, is accompanied with a manner which leads to frequent association with the adjective 'rugged.' Its appositeness in the musical field is equally happy. There is in much of Ireland's writing a certain ruggedness, of thought rather than expression, that plays an important part in giving it its individual character, which is so pronounced that the mere statement of one of his themes would generally suffice to indicate the author. Almost invariably the dominant impression they leave is that whatever distinction they have is the reward, in the first place, of sincerity, to which mere proficiency is no more than incidental.

John Ireland was born August 13, 1879, at Inglewood, Bowdon, Cheshire. His father, whose family hailed from Fifeshire, was a writer, and for some time edited the *Manchester Examiner and Times*. He included among his friends many eminent authors of the day, notably Carlyle, Leigh Hunt, and Emerson. The composer's mother belonged to a Cumberland family, so that his heredity is Northern on both sides, which may perhaps account for some traits in his personality. 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, and from then to 1908, the date of his Fantasy Trio, he was forming his style by means of works which he no longer considers representative.

The more important of these early works will be found included in the list of John Ireland's compositions which will appear at the end of the second portion of this article. It is essential that they should be placed on record, lest anyone should be led to believe, for instance, that 'The Forgotten Rite' represents an isolated experiment in orchestral writing, or that the Violin Sonata in D minor, which now stands as No. 1, had no predecessors in this form. Mr. Ireland's judgment of all this music means neither more nor less than that he does not invite performances of it, because the incomplete impression they would give of his work as a whole might affect the prospects of those compositions to which he attaches importance. It does not mean that it contains no redeeming elements. Far from that being the case, I can speak with some knowledge of its excellence, for I saw a number of his manuscripts about fifteen years ago, and my recollection of them is, with certain reservations, entirely in their favour. What those reservations are may be deduced from what I have said concerning the special difficulties which the composer had to overcome before he could express himself with freedom. I use the word 'freedom' here advisedly, as conveying something radically different from fluency or facility, which John Ireland has never possessed and has no ambition to acquire. His whole temperament is imbued with suspicion of the facile, and it needs no great stretch of the imagination to picture him unjustly rejecting material to which he ascribed little value for no

better reason than that it shaped itself too plausibly. There were also among those early works a few small things which owed their existence more or less to the difficult circumstances in which a rising composer is placed, especially in this country. Access to publishers is only too often purchased, in the first place, by conforming to certain of their commercial requirements, and there is probably no composer, however eminent, who has not some reason to sympathise with Elgar's feelings on becoming known through the medium of 'Salut d'Amour.' So far as I am aware, nothing that John Ireland considered at the time to be a pot-boiler has become famous, but if he did on occasion write such pieces, the main responsibility for them rests elsewhere. In any case they have no more relation to the serious works he wrote at this time, than they have to those by which he has since become known.

This early period came to an end in 1908 with the Fantasy in A minor for pianoforte, violin, and 'cello, which, in its revised form, may be regarded as the starting point of the new. Although not representative, there is much in the writing of it that is characteristic. The feeling is classical throughout, and unity is secured not so much by the derivation of the thematic material, which is a familiar device in cyclic works, as by a less obvious affinity of themes which maintain their independence. The use of themes which are homogeneous without being positively related often produces the better result, and the cohesion of this attractive trio is not the least of its many qualities.

From this point onwards the choice lies before us of dealing with John Ireland's works chronologically, or according to the usual subdivisions. He has written since then one orchestral work, 'The Forgotten Rite,' two Violin Sonatas, two Trios, a number of songs, and some pianoforte works.

It was in 1913 that he reverted to the pianoforte for which he had written several works in his immature period. In the meantime his style had passed through an important transformation, and when 'Three Decorations' made their appearance there were many who considered that he had joined the ranks of the Impressionists and even a few who charged him with a French allegiance. Both were wrong, and the collective title of these three pieces is a more reliable clue to their significance. Incidentally, it should be noted here that the separate titles—'The Island Spell,' 'Moon-Glade,' and 'The Scarlet Ceremonies'—as well as the quotations from Arthur Symons and Arthur Machen which appear below them, were selected after the music was written, and are therefore to be considered as kindred suggestions and not as subjects to be illustrated musically. The first of the pieces has attained to a certain measure of popularity on account of its delicate, evanescent charm which calls for the utmost refinement in performance. 'Moon-Glade' is harmonically characteristic, and the third piece has at least one subject which is thematically so:

Ex. 1.

mp cantato ed espress.
p eguale.

mp cantato ed espress.
p eguale.

All three seem to have an inherent relation to the literary movement of the later 'nineties, though it would be quite wrong to regard them as literary music.

The next pianoforte work was the Rhapsody, which dates from 1915. I quote the following from an article which I contributed to the *American Musical Quarterly* for April of this year:

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.

Appended are two characteristic examples from this work, the first comprising the opening bars and the second an important theme:

Ex. 2.

Allegro risoluto.
f marcato e deciso.

The next important work for pianoforte consists of 'Four Preludes,' written at various dates and collected in 1917. From the same article I quote concerning them, and the 'London Pieces' which appeared soon afterwards, as follows:

The first Prelude, 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. That 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 naive and simple charm, which is akin to that of some of the more direct songs, 'Sea-Fever' or 'Heart's 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.

(To be continued.)