

THE MUSICAL TIMES

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SIR JOHN GOSS.

RIPE in years, and surrounded by respect and honour, John Goss died on Monday, the 10th ult. The hand of death had not been laid upon him without warning. For some considerable time his higher faculties had shown symptoms of gradual decline, and his state of health had been a constantly increasing source of solicitude to those near to him; but, as we all know, at such a time the love of those most closely bound to the slowly receding form seems to grow warmer and expand as it is the more needed and the more severely taxed. For those who are now saddened by his loss our sympathy is more demanded than if his removal had been more sudden. We must not look upon John Goss as one of those lucky human beings on whom special gifts are bestowed as if by a capricious fate or mere chance. His history undoubtedly adds one more instance to the long list of those in whom genius was hereditary. John Jeremiah Goss, uncle of Sir John Goss who was born in 1770, achieved a high reputation as a vocalist. He was a vicar-choral of St. Paul's, a lay-vicar of Westminster Abbey, and a gentleman of the Chapel Royal. Various anecdotes tend to prove that he used his rich and sweet alto voice with the skill of a genuine artist. He died in 1817, and was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral. Joseph Goss, the father of John Goss, was organist of Fareham, Hants. In that neighbourhood there still lingers a tradition of his natural ability, and it is probable he would have left his mark had he been placed in a more favourable sphere of labour. On December 27, 1800, his son John was born in Fareham, but, fortunately for him, he was elected a chorister of the Chapel Royal when eleven years of age. He thus had an early association with that literature of Church music which was afterwards to be enriched so nobly from his own pen. The education of chorister-boys in those days, even within the shadows of the palace of St. James, was of a most happy-go-lucky description. On two days in each week a parochial schoolmaster (for some time the schoolmaster of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields) attended the house in Adelphi Terrace, where the boys lived, and gave them an hour and a half's instruction. These days were appropriately termed "slate days," because the rudiments of arithmetic occupied the greater part of the time. This constituted for a considerable period the only training *in literis humanioribus* of the young gentlemen of His Majesty's Chapel

Royal. Nor does it seem that musical instruction, outside the usual routine work of learning necessary anthems and canticles, was more liberally bestowed, for on one occasion the youngster John Goss bought out of his hardly saved pocket-money a copy of a set of Handel's organ concertos (Walsh's Pianoforte Edition). Whilst walking across the school-room one day with the book under his arm, he met his music-master (whose name had better not be here given). The master accosted him, "What have you under your arm?" "If you please, sir," said little Goss, trembling, "it's only Handel's organ concertos, and I thought I should like to learn to play them." "Oh! only Handel's concertos," replied the master; "and pray, sir, did you come here to learn to *play* or to *sing*?" "To sing, sir," said Goss, utterly discomfited. The master then seized the book, and crowned his argument by hitting the boy on the head with it. Poor Goss never again saw his beloved book! But his true genius successfully struggled against such adverse conditions and surroundings, and he managed to seek and find for himself the opportunities for study which others denied him. That the results were good is proved by a manuscript sonnet still preserved, dated July 18, 1816, "In a deep sequestered grove," composed at Poole, in Dorset. It is evidently the work of a young and unpractised hand, but it is rich in promise, and must doubtless have been an interesting memento to its author, or he would not have allowed the copy to remain amongst the few unpublished autographs which survive him. About this time he had certainly a leaning towards the stage, for a "Negro Song," for three voices, and scored for a small band (strings, flutes, oboes, clarionets, and two horns), is dated 1819, and probably formed a contribution to some drama. Later still, in 1827, he most likely composed the music to the play, "The Serjeant's Wife," although the overture only exists in his own handwriting, and there is reason to believe his name was never publicly attached to the work. He was now organist of the new church, St. Luke, Chelsea, to which post he had been appointed after a competition on December 24, 1824. In the previous year (1823) his diary records that he had written a canon, 4 in 2, "Who can tell how oft," and also a canon, 6 in 3, "I will always give thanks," and four glees, "What is life?" (three voices), "Sweet Rose" (four voices), "Unless with my Amanda," and "O Summer," and an anthem, "Forsake me not," still in manuscript. In the same year in which he was appointed organist at Chelsea he wrote a canon, 4 in 2, to the words "Cantate Domine" (see "Harmonicon," vol. ii., p. 228). He soon, however, tried his hand

* The writer would not have ventured to tell this story at such a time had he not heard it from Sir John Goss's own lips.

at higher productions, for in 1825 an "Overture in F minor" was rehearsed by the Philharmonic Society, and eventually (in 1827) performed at one of their concerts with so much success that it was again given to the public at the British Concerts in 1835. Goss was evidently at this period of his life devoting much of his attention to orchestral writing, for in the same year in which his Overture in F minor was performed by the Philharmonic Society he composed an Overture in E flat. Of the two, that in F minor is decidedly the better; but both are full of graceful phrases, sometimes skilfully handled, although it is probable that neither of them would satisfy the cravings of our modern advanced school. They must have made a very good impression at the time, because a few years later the Philharmonic Society gave Goss every inducement to write more orchestral music, as the following letter, dated January 9, 1833, testifies:—

Sir,—Agreeably to a resolution passed at a General Meeting of the Philharmonic Society, I am instructed to offer you a third portion of one hundred guineas, namely, the sum of thirty-five pounds, for an instrumental composition which shall be the property of the Society for two years from the time of its delivery, after which the copyright shall revert to you, the Society reserving to themselves the privilege of performing it at all times, and with the understanding that you shall be allowed to publish any arrangement of it as soon as you may think proper after its first performance at their Concert.—I am, Sir, your obedient servant, W. WATTS, Secretary.

This liberal and certainly complimentary proposal does credit to the Philharmonic Society at that time, but it does not appear to have had the desired effect of drawing Goss' talents into the channel of instrumental music. It is more than probable that he already began to feel that his real strength would show itself more as a writer of vocal works. The success of his glee "There is beauty on the mountain," which was composed in the same year as the F minor Overture (1825), must have been a strong confirmation of his views on this subject, for it certainly ranks in the first class of compositions of this style—a remark which he himself would have not ventured to make with regard to his overtures. But the usual routine of teaching, which was the more compulsory, as he was surrounded by young children (he had married Miss New when only twenty-one years of age, who now survives him), limited very much the number of works he turned out. His diary records that a "Requiem," inscribed to the memory of the Duke of York, was composed in 1827; another "Requiem" in 1829, in honour of Shield, as also "Hallelujah," a canon for equal voices; and in 1833 the glees "Fanny of the Dale," "Ossian's Hymn to the Sun," and "The Holiday Gown." How much he owed to the influence of Attwood can only be fully appreciated when we consider the merits of the anthem, "Have mercy upon me," which gained the "Gresham Prize" in 1833 (and which he dedicated to his master, Attwood), placed side by side with those produced when this master's instruction had begun to bear fruit. Intimate friends of Goss know how much he cherished every memorial of his intercourse with that talented musician; indeed he never talked about him without considerable emotion. All those fine anthems, on which the lasting fame of Goss will stand, were composed after his appointment to the Organistship of St. Paul's Cathedral in 1838, on the death of Attwood. But we are

again led to regret that Goss' active work as a teacher (especially of harmony, on which he wrote a well-known treatise in 1833)* should have placed such obstacles in his career as a composer. In 1842 he wrote the anthem "Blessed is the man," but after this no sacred composition of any importance seemed to have come from his pen until the year 1852, when at the request of Dean Milman he composed the plaintive and beautiful Dirge, and that noble anthem, "If we believe that Jesus died," for the funeral of the Duke of Wellington. The writer of this notice well remembers the scene when the work was rehearsed by a large and fine choir in the music-room, Store Street. When the last few bars *pianissimo* had died away, there was a profound silence for some time, so deeply had the hearts of all been touched by its truly devotional spirit. Then there gradually arose on all sides the warmest congratulation to the composer, it could hardly be termed *applause*, for it was something much more genuine and respectful.

The unproductiveness of Goss' genius between the years 1842 and 1852 has just been alluded to. If it be true, as was currently reported at the time, that this was partly owing to the careless and unkind criticisms passed by some members of his own choir on the anthem composed in 1842 ("Blessed is the man"), he must once more have been attracted towards the composition of Church music by the splendid reception of "If we believe," ten years later; for, from this date (1852), there appeared from time to time numerous anthems of various dimensions though of invariable excellence. "Praise the Lord, O my soul," which must share with "If we believe" the place of honour as one of Goss' most admirable productions, was composed in 1854 for the Bi-centenary Festival of the Sons of the Clergy, on which occasion (unless the writer's memory deceives him) it was performed with orchestral accompaniments. His appointment to the post of composer to Her Majesty, in 1856, gave further impetus to his labours. "Christ our Passover," and "Behold I bring you glad tidings," especially written for THE MUSICAL TIMES, were issued in 1857, and several anthems of less importance in the next three years. In 1861 he composed "The Wilderness"; and in 1863 added three splendid contributions to Church music, namely, "O taste and see how gracious the Lord is," "Stand up and bless the Lord your God," and "Lift up thine eyes and behold." His powers were now at their highest point of strength, his long experience giving special charm to the "part-writing" of his vocal compositions. In 1865, "Brother, thou art gone before us," was set to music at the request of Dean Milman, the author of the beautiful words, and sung at the Sons of the Clergy Festival. "Come, and let us return," and "O give thanks," appeared in 1866; and in 1869, "O Saviour of the world," of which last it seems not too much to say that, considering its modest pretensions, it is the most natural, purely written, and impressive anthem in the whole range of musical literature. For depth of expression it has been not inaptly compared to the last vocal production of Mozart, the motett, "Ave verum corpus."

* He was one of the Professors of Harmony at the Royal Academy of Music.

Soon after this time it was evident that the physical strength of Goss was, though very gradually, very certainly becoming reduced; and it was felt by all his friends, of whom none were more attached to him than the members of the Chapter, that he was hardly capable of grappling with that thorough reconstruction of the choral foundation which public opinion had long demanded, and which enlarged pecuniary resources and an active and interested Chapter had now rendered perfectly feasible. When the Queen returned public thanks in St. Paul's for the providential escape of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales almost from the very jaws of death, the *Te Deum* of thanksgiving, and the anthem "The Lord is my strength," were composed for the occasion by Goss, who then retired from the duties of Organist, and soon afterwards, to the satisfaction of the whole musical profession, received the honour of knighthood from Her Majesty.

Further well-deserved recognition of his abilities awaited him. In the summer term of 1876, in the seventy-sixth year of his age, the old man might have been seen leaning on the arm of Arthur Sullivan in the Senate House of the University of Cambridge, called to receive, at the same time as his young and distinguished pupil, the degree of Mus. Doc., *honoris causâ*. His visits to the Cathedral, in which so much of his life had been passed, now became less and less frequent, although he never lost an opportunity of encouraging, by words of praise or advice, those who were trying hard to improve the musical services of his loved church. He was urged to set the *Benedictus* to music, so that his *Te Deum* might be used as portion of a Service. This he did; and it is probable that his last look at St. Paul's was taken after he had been listening to a splendid rendering of this his last work by the fine choir of the Cathedral.

As an organist it is difficult to pass an opinion on Goss. The organs of his youth were very different instruments to those of our time, and if he were not a brilliant performer from a modern point of view, it is equally certain that many of our young organists would be utterly unable to produce the fine effects which Goss produced on an organ having two octaves of very clumsy pedals, a gamut-G swell, a 16-ft. (CCC) great organ manual, and two or three unruly composition-pedals. He always accompanied the voices (especially when *solî*) with thoroughly good taste, and his extempore voluntaries were sometimes models of grace and sweetness.

As a teacher Goss held a very high place. He was painstaking and careful with his pupils to an extent rarely found in those on whom nature has bestowed genius, and a large number of musicians holding positions of eminence feel that they owe to him a lasting debt of gratitude. His talents in this direction seem to be inherited by his only surviving son, Mr. Walter Goss, who is widely known as a most successful teacher. It may not be out of place to mention here that Lucy Goss, a daughter of Mr. Walter Goss, is now a scholar of the National Training School of Music, and, though young, already gives the fairest promise of becoming an eminent *pianiste*.

As a man Goss commanded universal respect. The chief features of his character were humility, genuine religious feeling, and a strong love of home and home-ties. So deep-seated was his humility that it produced a sort of shyness in his manner, which partially unfitted him for the rougher duties of public life. The discipline and efficiency of the Cathedral Choir reached a very low standard during the later portion of his career. But, although Goss was not altogether the man to cope with those self-willed musicians who were on the staff, he must not be solely blamed for the unsatisfactory state of the Cathedral Choir. The fact is, he had for a considerable period to deal with a Chapter which, taken as a body, had neither the power nor wish to face the unpleasant duty of becoming reformers. His hearty interest in all the improvements which he lived to witness in the reorganisation of the choral staff by the present Dean and Chapter, and the sincere pleasure which the now beautiful musical services gave him, prove beyond doubt that, had his lot been cast in better days, Goss would have been second to no one in his efforts to raise the musical credit of St. Paul's to its proper level. Probably no musician ever had fewer hostile detractors than Goss. This was partly due to his natural amiability, but also partly due to the fact that he often shunned and avoided those unpleasant calls of duty in which, to take definite action, means, to make a personal enemy. If we admire or envy him in this respect, we must not the less give honour to those who accept trusts and perform public duties at all hazards. That Goss was a man of religious life was patent to all who came in contact with him, but an appeal to the general effect of his sacred compositions offers public proof of the fact. It is not less true in music than in other arts, that the artist writes his character in his works. In uncouth modulations and combinations can be traced the man who wishes to be thought original; in over-wrought tone-colouring the bad taste of a man who, had he been trusted with a paint-brush instead of a pen, would have revelled in violent contrasts and in the grotesque; in pedantries and conventional clever tricks stands out the man who is anxious to be thought learned, and values artifice more than art. A careful study and familiar knowledge of the sacred compositions of Goss leaves a very definite feeling that their author was a man of refined thought, religious in life, possessing a keen appreciation of the resources of his art tempered by a firm resolution to use them only in a legitimate manner. There is that gentleness and repose about them which eminently characterised the man himself. His disposition was tender and sweet; an unkindness or rough word did not rouse, it *wounded* him. He treated all others with consideration and goodness, and seemed hurt when he had occasion to realise the fact that others did not always treat him in the same way. He loved quietness, and valued the affection of others. He has now reached the haven where life's short and cruel storms can no more threaten him. For him we feel that the oft-chanted prayer "May he rest in peace" is hardly needful; we can say, in faith and loving remembrance, "He is in peace."