

Should We Compete Vocally?

COMPETITIONS and COMMUNITY SINGING

THE CHEER GERM—PSYCHOLOGY AND SONG—THE WELLINGTON
COMPETITIONS—THE VOGUE OF THE MUSIC HALL TURN

Sing, Sing, Why Shouldn't We Sing?

No reason at all, provided we do it at the right time, and choose the right place. These conditions prevailing, there are many reasons why we should; for we are told that singing is good for the lungs, and that, no matter who the singer, he, with practice, may develop an ear for music. (although his practice may have the contrary effect on his neighbours). Also, singing is one of the most natural forms of self-expression, like talking, howling, swearing, or laughing. We all know what relief the vocal expression of our feelings can give; so, if we are happy, why shouldn't we sing?

Community Singing—Cui Bono?

But why should we community-sing?

Now that the season for mass singing is ended, we, by which I mean those of us who are really interested in music, are tempted to ask—*Cui Bono?* Does community singing do anything toward helping forward a real appreciation of music amongst the masses?

Many musical highbrows scoff at community singing on the score that it leads nowhere musically. Probably, too, they do not like it because it is so popular. Highbrows never like anything popular. It must be very annoying to them to find concert halls crowded by people who have come to sing the latest "song hits," when there are more empty seats than fall if men of the calibre of Lenghi Cellini and Zacharewitsch are billed to perform. I must admit that it seems to me merely funny, and not at all a sign of musical enthusiasm, to see serious and sedate adults earnestly singing in chorus "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles"; and it does strike one as a waste of good emotion to find them pouring their souls into such words as "Smile the while you kiss me sad adieu"—but they like it, and it does them no harm. I expect they'll do it again next year. There must be some reason why, when several religious or otherwise happy people are gathered together, they are impelled to burst into song.

Psychologists and Crowds

Psychologists consider abnormal the characteristics of an assembly of people who are met with some common bond of interest among its members. Individuals thus assembled give way, it seems, to an impulsiveness, credulity, and suggestibility which are foreign to their natures when they are separate and clothed in their right minds. In fact, mentally, people in a crowd are temporarily inferior. Emotions sweep through a group of people irresistibly—for, as Ruskin said, "A crowd thinks by infection, catching opinions like a cold."

The Quest for a Germ

Now, the word infection does not conjure pleasant thoughts, and it is something one usually avoids, yet, here is the phenomenon! There are a large number of people in this country who, the moment they hear there is a chance to do some community singing, flock together with the deliberate intention of assuming

an inferior mental state and catching a germ—the "cheer germ."

This is how they do it. They make themselves passive, putting themselves entirely under the baton of the Song Leader, chosen for his wit and personality rather than his musical ability. He then induces them to sing the most absurd and sentimental songs that can be collected by the organisers of these little affairs. They Coué to themselves—

"We are happy, we are happy;

Voices ring, voices ring.

Radiate the Cheer Germ,

Radiate the Cheer Germ.

Ding, dong, ding. Ding, dong, ding."

Half an hour or so of this kind of thing reduces them to a completely gullible state, and their voices and hearts having been softened, they are addressed by their preacher, politician or charity collector, and give generously when the plate comes round. If it is a midday affair it is a pity to go straight home, and the female portion of the gathering spends the afternoon "looking" at the shops. Oh, a splendid move on the part of the tradesmen, this community singing business!

Yes, I can see why they *should* sing, if it affects them like this. A state of abnormality and suggestiveness is to be desired occasionally by those who want our money and moral support these hard times, and it means relaxation—a wonderful word to the weary, worn and sad. But I can't see that sing-songs of this description are *necessarily* going to promote an added interest in *Music*, unless followed up by something better. How much desire for better music has the ex-soldier shown since the War? He spent hours cheering himself with "Tipperary" and contemporary popular songs during his route-marching days.

The Wellington Competitions

The Wellington Musical and Elocutionary Competition Society has had a record festival this year. During a period of three weeks over three thousand separate items were presented, and the attendances in the auditorium at all the competitions were excellent, specially large numbers being present in the Town Hall every evening. I was glad to see that these audiences were not composed of women only, even during the daytime, and at night there were an equal number of both sexes in the concert hall. It reflects great credit on Wellington that such a town can busy itself for so long with artistic things.

The atmosphere of these competitions is a very real thing, and one that it is good for our young people to breathe. The very corridors vibrated with it, as happy-faced competitors bustled from room to room, or chatted outside the secretary's office, and cheery little groups of friends greeted each other and gossiped about the latest results, flinging final words of encouragement and advice to passers-by before entering the competition-chamber, whence occasional strains of music or the raised voice of the elocutionist stole out as the doorkeeper peeped

in to see "how things were going." The spirit that pervaded the place was typically British. One was struck with the sportsmanlike attitude of the competitors, girls and boys alike (in fact, may I say it?—it was more pronounced in the girls, for they, being girls, were sympathetic, while boys, being boys, were inclined to grin cruelly when one of their friends broke down, or looked sheepish, as boys have a habit of doing when they are on show.) It is characteristic of the British race that they should evolve this type of competition as a stimulus to art, stirring enthusiasm for intangible things by appealing to the sporting instinct that is so strong within them. It is a notion that has not been carried out along the same lines by Latin or Germanic peoples.

It is interesting to note the kind of work which held most favour with the society, who presumably know their public. There were, out of two hundred classes, only *twenty-four* for instrumental music, nineteen of these being for piano-forte solos, *three* for violin, one for flute (three entries), and one for clarionette (four entries). The standard of performance in these classes did not seem very high, moreover. In face of these facts it would be futile to suggest classes for chamber music and concerted musical work, alas! On the musical side, vocal work was most popular, there being eighty-six classes. The disparity between eighty-six and twenty-four is rather large. Entries for choral classes were disappointingly small. It is time our schools were vying with each other in the art of choral singing, and it is a pity to waste the opportunities afforded by a competition of this size.

There were ninety-one classes for the elocutionary and dancing side—recitals in costume, recitations, speaking, ballet dancing, and so on. Here was the most popular interest shown, and a higher standard of work attained. If this is significant of the public taste, ours, like the Australian, is tending to become a nation of singers and theatrical performers. Our country is young, and likes movement. We musicians must wait.

One would like to make the usual comments, and dilate upon them. The examiners seemed overworked. How can a tired man be strictly just? Can one man really be clever enough to judge with equal fairness performances on the piano, violin, flute, and clarionette? Even for one special subject, can one man alone, with preconceived ideas of technique, interpretation, and his own personal preferences, judge the best every time? Why *do* most singers sing? Why such dusty old pianoforte pieces for the younger competitors? It seems a pity that perhaps the best performances came from precocious youngsters under nine years of age, in recitals of their own choice (or rather, that of their parents'), only suitable for adults over nineteen with a penchant for music-hall turns—and so on.

Photographs of many of the successful competitors in the Wellington Competitions will be found on page 5. —R.S.