

"RULE BRITANNIA"

An Inspiration to German Composers

Music is universal: It knows no frontiers. If you have any doubts about this, read how one of the most patriotic of all British tunes was "borrowed" by three of Germany's most famous composers.

IN the year 1740, Frederick, Prince of Wales, planned to celebrate two important events of which the anniversaries fell on successive days, the birthday of his three-year-old daughter, Augusta, and the accession of the House of Hanover.

For the first of these anniversaries David Mallet, under-secretary to the Prince, and James Thomson, the poet, collaborated in a Masque running high with patriotic fervour "taken from the various fortunes of Alfred the Great." The music for this was composed by the leading English theatrical composer of the day, Thomas Augustine Arne.

The scene that evening at Frederick's beautiful residence, at Maidenhead, must have been magnificent indeed. But to those present the occasion, if they had realised it, would have been memorable for the first performance of a song which already in their lifetime was to become a second National Anthem.

At the climax of the Masque the popular tenor Thomas Lowe, in the character of a venerable bard, stepped forward and sang for the first time an "Ode in Honour of Great Britain, call'd Rule Britannia."

By a curious coincidence, not many years later, following the putting down of the '45 rebellion, Arne made a setting of a loyal song to be sung at Drury Lane Theatre. This song, "God Save Our Noble King," was "encored with repeated Huzzas," and thus Arne can claim the credit of introducing to the British public both our National Anthems.



SIR ALEXANDER MACKENZIE
Composed the "Britannia" Overture

"Rule Britannia" was to become a feature in all subsequent British patriotic demonstrations; as for example at Drury Lane when Nelson's victory in the Battle of the Nile was announced during a

play. The excitement was intense when a quintet of famous singers came forward to sing the song at the call of the audience.

Borrowed by Handel

When Handel composed his "Occasional Oratorio" to celebrate the "northern victories" over the Pretender, he borrowed the opening bars of Arne's "Rule Britannia" for a number called "War Shall Cease, Welcome Peace." "Rule Britannia" was also one of the patriotic songs sung at the theatres during the period of panic caused through the Pretender's march to Derby.

The 18th century Jacobites adapted the tune of "Rule Britannia" to words beginning:—

*"Britain, rouse at Heav'n's command
And crown thy native prince again!"*

The tune got into the hymn books. The Rev. Rowland Hill's hymn to it began:—

*"When Jesus first at Heaven's command
Descended from His Azure throne,"*

and its refrain "Hail Immanuel," was no doubt lustily sung at the service of Volunteers for which the hymn was expressly written. "Rule Britannia"



THOMAS ARNE
Wrote the second National Anthem first

also got into Attwood's anthem "O Lord, grant the King a long life." There was even, in 1794, an Americanised version—"Rise Columbia!" by Robert Treat Paine.

Favourite with Beethoven

As if that was not enough in the way of imitation, Beethoven wrote piano variations on the tune (poor ones) and many other composers who were far from being Beethovens followed this example. "Rule Britannia" must in fact have been a special favourite with Beethoven, because it is very prominently featured in his "Battle Symphony," which he composed to commemorate Wellington's victory over the French at Vittoria in 1813. "God Save the King" is also brought into the symphony.

Wagner, Too

In 1837 Wagner wrote his Overture "Rule Britannia" at Königsberg. The work was finished on 15th March, and later in the month it was played



"RULE BRITANNIA"

From the first printed copy of "Rule Britannia"

there. It was the only thing he wrote in a whole year. The tune of "Rule Britannia" undoubtedly fascinated Wagner, because he considered that the first eight notes portrayed the vigour, resolution, and eternal greatness of the English character.

Wagner sent the Overture by post to Sir George Smart, then omnipotent musical professor in London, for performance by the London Philharmonic Society. The postage on the package being insufficient, the MS did not reach its destination, and it has been suggested that the parcel might still be lying in some dim archive of the Post Office, "left till called for." However, the parts were ultimately discovered among the papers of C. B. Gamble of Leicester. The work was published in 1904, and played at Queen's Hall on 2nd January, 1905.

Historical Repercussions

When the Royal Academy of Music in London celebrated its seventieth birthday in the 'nineties, the then Principal, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, composed his "Britannia" Overture. The President of the Academy was the Duke of Edinburgh, known to the British public as "Our Sailor Prince," and on that account Sir Alexander made "Rule Britannia" one of the principal themes.

The work met everywhere with a cordial reception, but never more than on a certain occasion in Liverpool. It happened that on that very day the German Kaiser's telegram to President Kruger was published, and "Britannia" became the vehicle of a patriotic demonstration rarely witnessed in a British concert room.



WAGNER
The tune fascinated him

A few days later when the piece was set down to be played at Dusseldorf, a "Verbot" was issued, and the offending work had the honour of being banned by the German police.

In connection with a rehearsal of the Overture by the London Symphony Orchestra under Dr. F. Read at Reading, a remarkable incident happened. After the timpani had played the opening signal and the brass had given out the principal theme, the church clock chimed the identical notes and in the same key. In the piece they are followed by an echo on the horns. On this occasion the clock deputised for them and entered just at the exact moment.

The "Britannia" Overture will be played by the Wellington Symphony Orchestra at a concert to be relayed from 2YC on Tuesday, November 14.