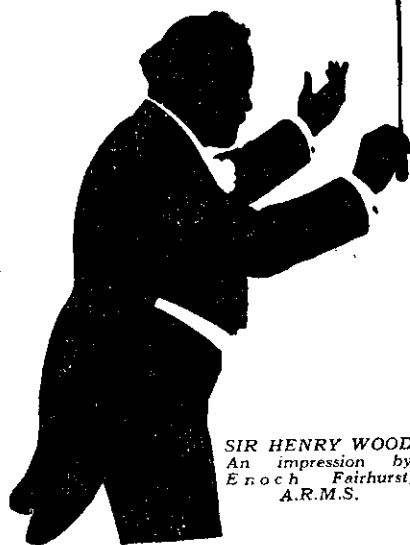


REHEARSING WITH

SIR HENRY

A Conductor With A Mania For Punctuality



SIR HENRY WOOD
An impression by
Enoch Fairhurst,
A.R.M.S.

arrives on the tick of 9.45 a.m. Anyone coming into a concert hall set ready for a rehearsal could, by the presence of four objects, identify H.J.W. as the conductor. Namely: two tuning forks (one for strings, one for woodwind), a typewritten notice with the exact time he is going to spend on each piece, and a ponderous Waterbury watch which marks out its owner's life, down to the very seconds.

After going round the orchestra, whanging his tuning-forks with a hammer, and cocking his ear, Sir Henry arrives back at the rostrum and lifts his stick, ready to begin as the church clock chimes 10. Then follows three hours of intense, and exacting rehearsal, by the end of which all nerves are frayed except the conductor's. His nervous energy is enormous; he rarely loses his temper.

No programme is carried out to more perfect timing. Not a moment is lost, not a minute unaccounted for. When composers are anxious to conduct their own works, Sir Henry is usually agreeable, but since these guest-conductors almost always overstep their time-limit, they end up by hearing something like this: "All these composers are the same! They all want extra time! I don't know how I'm going to get through. One hour to rehearse 95 minutes' music and two arias! My part of the concert, of course, doesn't matter!"

Attention to Detail

Sir Henry's mania for punctuality is the result of having to cope with an incredible amount of work. The reason why rehearsals are up to the minute is that nothing is overlooked which can be done beforehand. He bows all the string parts, arranges the seating and checks the copies for mistakes, every score being signed "Corrected — Henry J. Wood" at the top, and scattered through with blue pencil reminders.

He may not rehearse the whole of the evening's programme if it is a Promenade, but never fails to make sure of a Symphony Concert.

Paradoxically, the orchestra is puzzled sometimes to know why he will go through regular items which they know well, and leaves a really tricky, new work till actual performance. But the players never feel any anxiety. They claim that his baton is the most helpful that has ever directed them. The tip of his white painted stick controls every note with a precision and supple expressiveness that no one can misunderstand. With his left hand he brings in the instruments, and never is an entry bungled twice. If, as often happens, he breaks his stick on the open lid of the piano, he mutters: "There you are, another ten-and-six gone!" and reaches for an ever-ready spare from the score cabinet beside him. He has never been known to break the second stick.

When he wants a thunderous passage, Sir Henry says: "I don't want any of your cosy ff's—I want a great sound... Don't be nervous—I'm never nervous! Rip it out and make the old ladies jump!"

THIS month, Sir Henry J. Wood, conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, is 75 years old. At that age anybody might be excused for being late for an appointment, but Sir Henry has only once been late for rehearsal in all his 48 years of conducting Proms. He

(Continued from previous page)

(b) "My dear, it's always like that in the Colonies." (Loc.: Country bus. Sex: F. Age: 60.)

(c) "And all of a sudden he broke all his ribs." (Loc. Street corner. Sex: Male. (Hurrah, at last!). Age: ??)

(d) "And he's had no married life at all, you might say." (Loc.: Theatre. Sex: F. Age: c. 40.)

(e) "She talks a lot but she never asks me up." (Loc. Tram. Sex: F. Age: 35.)

(f) "The moon's cockeyed 'n' everything." (Loc. Street. Sex: M. (U.S. Marine). Age: ??)

(Note.—It would appear from the above table that women are the most useful contributors to a collection like this. However, male collectors will find that their own sex will provide them with as many tasty morsels as I have gathered from mine.)

IF you desire your collection to have Simple Class, you will be well advised not to include a section headed "Out of the Mouths of Babes" or, more tersely, "Kid Cracks." These are amateurs' meat, easily come by and valueless as a seventh reprint in a library of first editions. However, the converse—that is, choice remarks from parent to child—occupy a high place. I have been collecting for several years and have only acquired two valuable pieces:

(1) "Don't say Eh? dear, say What?"
(2) "Not Mickey Mouses, darling, Mickey Mice."

And now a warning to Beginners. Remember always to proceed with caution lest you frighten your prize. If you are too eager you may land yourself in difficulties with the police as the auricular equivalent of Peeping Tom. This above all (since Polonius must always have the penultimate word at least), if you wear a small dark moustache shave it off. You are likely to be severely misunderstood.



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