

A WEEK-END WITH SIR HENRY WOOD

(Written for "The Listener" by L. D. AUSTIN)

WHEN I re-visited England in 1934 after a long absence in New Zealand, one of my first outings in London was to attend a Promenade Concert at Queen's Hall where, as a student, I had been a regular and enthusiastic follower of Sir (then Mr.) Henry Wood. It struck me as amazing that after all those years I should find this illustrious conductor still at his old post, unchanged in all save outward appearance.

In his early days, Sir Henry Wood looked far more Slavonic than British, despite the fact that he was a Londoner born and bred. With his luxurious black hair and beard, he seemed the counterpart of the Russian musical enthusiasts of Moscow and St. Petersburg; and in fact there was always a distinct Russian tendency in him. It was noticeable in his marvellous readings of Russian composers, with whom he always seemed to have had an inherent sympathy. To complete the coincidence, his first wife was a Russian princess.

In 1934, however, his outward Slavonic characteristics had given way to a much more British appearance, though there was no abatement of the fiery Russian spirit when required. As I was acting as musical representative of a New Zealand journal while in England, I made myself known to Sir Henry and requested an interview. His response to this overture was something of which I had never dreamed. He invited me to spend a week-end at his country house, Apple Tree Farm, situated some 30 miles out of London, where on a Sunday afternoon he was accustomed to receive the elite of British musical life.

Enthusiasm for Hobbies

Among his hobbies, at that time, apart from music, was an enthusiasm for carpentry, painting and pottery, at all of which he was an expert. In the garden of his beautiful home he had turned an old barn into a magnificent reception room, the floors and windows of which he had re-modelled with his own hands, in keeping with the style of the ancient days of which that barn was a survival. Its walls were adorned with landscape paintings, both in oil and water colour, besides innumerable crayon sketches, while in the corners stood beautiful specimens of pottery. All this was the work of Sir Henry Wood himself, done in his scanty leisure hours. Beautiful rugs and easy chairs and settees were dotted about the room, at the further end of which was a slightly raised platform containing a concert grand piano.

In this room Sir Henry held court every Sunday afternoon during the greater part of the year. On the occasion referred to, it was my privilege to meet there a number of distinguished musicians, including Dame Myra Hess, Harriet Cohen, Rosa Newmarch, Dame Ethel Smyth, Jelly d'Aranyi, Frederick Lamond, Egon Petri, Sir Arnold Bax, Eric Coates, Sir Adrian Boult, Mark Hambourg, besides some lesser lights.

To all of these I was introduced by Sir Henry himself as his friend from



SIR HENRY WOOD
(As he was in the early "Prom" days)

New Zealand. It was certainly a memorable occasion, and one not easily forgotten.

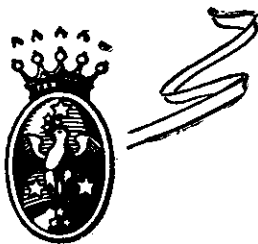
At that time Sir Henry was very eager to visit Australia and New Zealand, and we discussed at length the possibilities of such a tour, which unfortunately the advent of war rendered impossible.

I met Sir Henry again on several occasions during my year's visit, and we often had chats about music in his dressing room behind the orchestral well at Queen's Hall. His was a delightful personality, absolutely natural and free from eccentricity or "side" of any kind.

Of his services to music there is no need for me to speak here. In a letter I received from him a few months ago, he said that the dream of his life was to build another concert hall, if possible on the site of his old musical home, which had been destroyed by a German bomb. Though he has not lived to see this dream fulfilled, music lovers throughout the world will surely hope for its realisation.

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