

## RADIO PLAY WRITING COMPETITION

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**RELIGIOUS DRAMA SOCIETY**  
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# Poetry, Music, and the Strange Case of A. E. Housman

(Written for "The Listener" by ALAN MULGAN)

SOME time ago a paragraphist in *Radio Viewsreel* said that A. E. Housman appeared to be allergic to music. In the strict sense of "allergic" this may be a slight exaggeration, for we don't know that music always affected Housman mentally in the way that carrots and coconuts affect some people physically. We do know, however, that he did not care for music, and we have the testimony of a friend of the effect upon him of settings of his own poems by the foremost English composer of to-day, sung by one of England's most gifted singers.

It may seem a strange business, for Housman was perhaps more sought after by composers than any other contemporary poet. Grant Richards says in his biography that the composers who set his verses must have numbered scores. "These musical people are more plague than profit," said Housman, but he gave permission. On the other hand, he would not allow his verse to be included in anthologies, mainly, one gathers, because detesting inaccuracy, he was afraid of errors in printing. A wrong punctuation infuriated him.

### Housman Reacted to His Own Songs

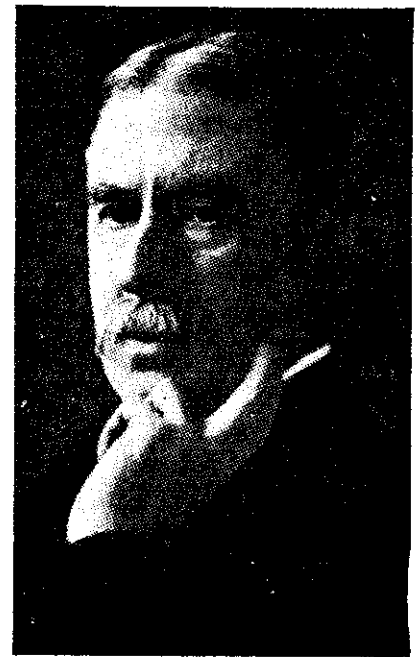
It is easy enough to see why Housman's verses attract the composer. They fulfil the old formula for poetry that it should be simple, sensuous, and passionate. The themes are as old and familiar as the hills, and are treated with the minimum of distraction. The listener could be in no doubt what the poet meant—provided, of course, that he caught the words. (Having allowed his verses to be set, Housman had no objection to their being broadcast. "I daresay the music is spoilt, but that is the composer's look-out, and the words are mostly inaudible.") There is also the fact that the poems present lovely and lasting pictures of the English countryside. A composer looking for something elemental and penetrating to try his skill upon, would be eager to fit those straight sharp arrows to his bow. I must confess that though I have read Housman's poems to myself many times, I could not absolutely guarantee to read them aloud in public. The last time I heard "Bredon Hill" I remarked to someone beside me that this was the sort of song that should not be sung in the broad light of day.

Yet Housman himself said his taste in music was "rather vulgar," and according to a friend, he cared nothing for music. Knowing that Housman had never heard his songs sung, he tried him with Vaughan Williams's settings, recorded by Gervase Elwes. This was the result:

I was oblivious of the effect until two of them had been played, and then, turning in my chair, I beheld a face wrought and flushed with torment, a figure tense and bolt upright as though in an extremity of controlling pain or anger, or both. To invite comment or question was too like bearding the lion in its den, so I ignored the subject and asked mildly if there was anything else he would like. A pause. There was a visible struggle for self-possession, a slow relaxation of posture, and then a naive admission that people talked a good deal about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; had we got the record? I turned it on, and watched. The sphinx-like countenance suggested anything and everything but pleasure, though there was an expression of contentment during the slow movement and faintest praise of it, and it alone, at the close.

### Other Unmusical Poets

We should not be surprised, however, by this lack of appreciation. There is plenty of proof that genius in letters can flower without love of music. There was Scott, who sometimes wrote as if a band were playing marches of triumph or laments for defeat in his head, and sometimes as in "Proud Maisie," achieved a lyric strain not far short of the highest. Scott was laboriously taught



A. E. HOUSMAN  
"Flushed with torment"

music, but his ear, as he said, was fatally defective, and he never got beyond enjoyment of simple songs. Macaulay, who also could be finely martial in his ringing lines, and could compose such a pastoral for woodwinds as:

And Venus loves the whispers  
Of plighted youth and maid,  
In April's ivory moonlight  
Beneath the chestnut shade.

noted in an account of a dinner at Windsor that "the band covered the talk with a succession of sonorous tunes. 'The Campbells are Coming' was one." Upon this Macaulay's biographer remarks that "this is the only authentic instance on record of Macaulay's having known one tune from another."

Swinburne's case was the most remarkable. If deliberate effort is a criterion, he was the most musical of poets. He could pass from the soft music of "lisp of leaves and ripple of rain" to the majestic organ lament of "Ave Atque Vale," but too often he plied his sound effects so vigorously and tactlessly that he sacrificed sense and deserved prosecution by the S.P.C. Alliteration. But Swinburne simply hated music. He was truly allergic to it. In plain English, it gave him a pain.

### Music and Morals

"The man that hath no music in himself, nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds. . . . These lines in *The Merchant of Venice* have done a lot of harm. Did Shakespeare write them "dramatically," or did they represent his own view? It was moonlight, and Lorenzo was talking to the woman he loved, in which circumstances neither a character nor his creator is on oath (Browning is still being charged, by people who ought to know better, with unjustified optimism because he made a mill-girl sing, on her one holiday in the year, "God's in his heaven — all's right with the world"). It is possible, however, that Shakespeare really believed what he wrote. He was passionately fond of music, and a commentator

(continued on next page)



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