

# THE PLIGHT OF THE BUMBLE BEE

Written for "The Listener"  
by J. M. D. HARDWICK

THERE was once a Russian composer of music called Nicolas Andreievitch Rimsky-Korsakov, and he once wrote a delightful fragment depicting so skilfully, and yet so musically, the tight buzzing of an insect's wings that its title, *The Flight of the Bumble Bee*, was almost superfluous.

That was many years ago. Since then the little masterpiece has remained so consistently popular with musicians all over the world that to-day it is seldom listened to by anyone. Not that it is never heard—scarcely a day goes by without its being played by someone, somewhere—but, like the *Poet and Peasant* overture, *The Dance of the Hours*, and Chopin's *Polonaise in A*, it comes and goes without any attention being paid to its passing.

"... each man kills the thing he loves," said Wilde. That is what they did to the Bumble Bee; and that is what most of us are doing to many another of our favourite works.

## Don't Want to Hear it Again

When I was still at school my father went one day into a music shop to buy a sixpenny gramophone record catalogue, and came out with a console model radiogram, which duly replaced our two-station, make-unknown radio. The first record I cajoled him into buying me was that of Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra playing Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* (*A Hundred Men and a Girl* was still fresh in my callow mind). It is an excellent recording of a fine work, played with all the colour and bombast Liszt himself could ever have hoped for, and for

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and to Madame Rambert and Ninette de Valois and the Sadler's Wells company must go the credit for giving to the ballet something characteristically English, and for establishing what is now regarded as an English National Ballet.

When we asked Miss Howe about the orchestra the company would bring out she said that the nucleus of the orchestra they had in Australia would come on here and be built up to over 20 players with the assistance of local artists. The orchestra leader was Hubert Foster-Clark, one of the leading conductors of ballet in England.

In Australia the company had played for 15 weeks in Melbourne, which was a record for ballet there (the Russians only lasted 12), and in Sydney they were now in their 14th week. Until this trip the company's only tours outside Britain had been to France and Germany. In New Zealand the company would give performances in the four main centres. After the Auckland season they would open at Wellington on May 29, at Dunedin on June 26, and at Christchurch on July 3.

weeks I listened to it almost nightly. But when I left home a few years later I left it behind me, and I shall neither request it to be sent on to me nor shall I ever purchase a replacement. I don't care if I never hear the *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* again.

The same might have happened to me with Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, had I not been prevented from hearing it for several years during the war. I have heard it once since the war, and I enjoyed it as never before.

It is dangerously easy, though, to slip back into the old ways. It is hard to resist the magic pull of Tchaikovsky's later symphonies, of Schumann in *A Minor*, of the Max Bruch violin concerto or the waltzes of Chopin. But it is a sinister pull. It induces the individual to wallow until he becomes swamped. When it is acting upon a group of individuals together, when it is a whole music-loving community that is being drawn unresistingly, there is danger indeed.

## No Restraint

The more they enjoy hearing a work the more they will clamour to hear it again. Naturally enough, but it is to the great discredit of those who are able to give it to them that no restraint has



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so far been put upon them. In wartime England, for instance, the classical works liked best by the most people were undoubtedly the piano concerti of Messrs. Grieg, Tchaikovsky (his first), and Rachmaninov (his second), and the *Fifth Symphony* of Beethoven. Whether it was due to a desire on the part of concert organisers to pack their halls and make money (the concert business gets few opportunities to make big profits), or a realisation by the artists that here was a chance to increase their personal popularity, or whether it was just a genuine, well-meant, but sadly mistaken belief that the people must at all costs be given what they want all the time, these four pieces were toted up and down the British Isles by all the best artists, played simultaneously in a hundred places, plugged one after another over the radio, condensed for those who wanted only the fat without the lean, jazzed up, danced to, crooned to, swooned to, in fact done everything to except put in cans or featured in Church services.

It was one of the greatest disservices that could have been done to the people who thronged to hear them and to music itself. Many more experienced listeners, finding these works so constantly included in the programmes of every orchestra in the country, took to staying at home and teaching themselves to play a little Bach on the tin whistle. And soon some of the Tchaikovskophiles began to discover Beethoven and Brahms and deserted their first love with upturned noses and a conviction that they had passed beyond "that stage." That is what happened to Mendelssohn, years ago. To-day it is still considered unfashionable to show any more than a grudging liking for the music of the man of whom Heifetz has said, "If it is conceivable that the music of Mendelssohn can die, then all music can die."

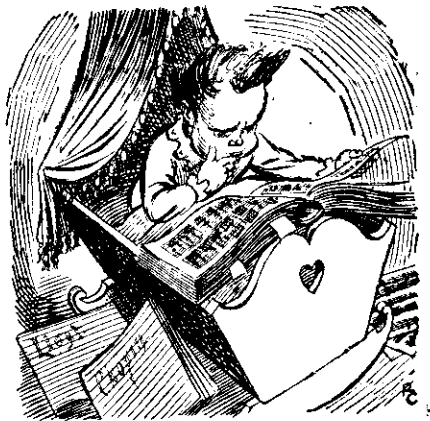
Mendelssohn will come back into public favour and Tchaikovsky will regain his rightful station with the greatest of them, just as surely as some other composer will be consigned to the shelf for a decade or two. But the individual who has become tired of a work of music, or of the works of one composer, through over-indulgence, can never hope to recapture that joy and satisfaction with them that once he knew.

## Too Much Music

Gluttony for music is hard to cure, and the patient gets little help from outside. Do we listen to too much music? No; few of us, I think, could accuse ourselves of that. But that we hear too much of it—whether we are conscious of doing so or not—is certain. Of course, the radio is to blame. With its help music to-day is everywhere about us. It is in our homes, our employers provide it for us during the day, it is thrown in with our cinema shows, we hear it as we walk along the street, as we relax on the beach and when we get a lift in a rich friend's car. No wonder we have to cudgel our minds so hard when we want to make ourselves pay attention to it.

There was none of this in the old days. Only at the actual concerts could good music be heard by large numbers of people, and most of the concerts were for the privileged few. Hugo Wolf, when he was a music student in that hub of the musical universe Vienna, was compelled to record in his diary, "I was for the first time at a Philharmonic Concert. . . . It was the first time that I have heard an orchestral work by Beethoven." Few music students in the world to-day are so placed at the age of 15. It has been truly remarked by an American writer that nowadays the thrill of discovering symphonic music must be chiefly the privilege of infants in their cradles.

The gramophone record has contributed its share towards the decline of intelligent listening to music. There are few important works that have not been recorded by some company or other, though I cannot help wishing at times that rather than add yet another recording of the *1812 Overture* or the *Pastoral* symphony to their catalogues the companies would give some lesser-known, less important work a chance.



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The more *Pastorals* they produce, the more we are bound to hear the work on the radio.

Of course, it cannot be denied that radio and the gramophone record have helped immensely to teach us all a lot about music. The danger lies in their misuse, which is over-use. Let the surfeited listener blame whom he likes, he must undertake to protect himself.

Deems Taylor tells how a friend of his, when asked why he had walked out of an important concert just before the major work was played, replied that he was "on the wagon." He was giving himself a rest from that particular work and whenever he ran up against it over a certain period of time he would do his utmost to prevent hearing it, even if it meant missing half a concert.

## Rationing Oneself

That is the drastic way to do it, and it is the best. No matter how many times a day the Bumble Bee comes buzzing over the ether (programme organisers are no more than human and some repetition is inevitable) we need not hear it once if we exercise a little strength of mind and operate one of the gadgets, with which every radio is fitted, which enables the station to be changed or the set turned off altogether. Record collectors can adopt the system used by broadcasting companies of writing on the cover of each record the date it was last played and can ration themselves to one performance a month or, better still, every two months.

And when any of us turns on his radio for a musical programme let him really listen to it. Let him treat it as he would treat a real concert and not just switch casually off if friends happen to drop in. And before he begins to tire, as he surely will if he tries to take in too much music at a sitting, let him have done with it for the evening and play himself at Patience.

