

SKULL AND CURTAIN— or the Curious Case of Haydn's Head

IN Manchester the other evening Sir Thomas Beecham conducted the BBC Northern Orchestra in a programme which included the Beethoven Third and Fourth Symphonies. The performances were first-rate, apart from a few difficulties experienced by the horns. Afterwards Sir Thomas quelled the uproar of applause in Manchester's Albert Hall with a precise and elegant speech. When he took the first rehearsals, he said, he found the orchestra knew *everything*.

"You have seen to-night a man going through the motions of conducting an orchestra trained by another man altogether. I will go and get him." And he brought out Charles Groves, the permanent Manchester conductor.

As far as I know, Beecham has not done quite the same sort of thing with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, whose regular conductor is Sir Adrian Boult, and I would not expect him to, for some of the roughest performances of Haydn and Mozart I have ever heard have been in routine programmes by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the texture coarse, the rhythm obstreperous, the solo work careless. I have seen Sir Adrian Boult conduct one whole movement of a Mozart Divertimento, his left hand fiddling with his moustache. But this was in a studio, with only a small invited audience sitting some distance away, and perhaps he knew they had mainly come to see Richard Strauss, who was the only near spectator. He sat in a chair a little behind Sir Adrian (waiting to conduct *Till Eulenspiegel*) and seemed not to mind greatly that the regular man appeared to conduct as if he was wondering how the next few bars ought to go.

THESE performances luckily are not the rule, since some composers move Boult to better things, but their frequency sharply accentuates the contrast with a programme we have heard this week by courtesy of Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk and the British Forces Network—the Northwest German Radio

Orchestra playing Mozart's Piano Concerto K.467 and his *Jupiter* Symphony. It would be easy to forgive the musicians of the city of Hamburg, 1948, if they played in the manner I have ascribed to their London counterparts; it is not easy to imagine how it is that they can play the last movement of the *Jupiter* Symphony in a manner that makes all other remembered performances fade away into irrelevance—indeed the whole work seemed more than it ever had seemed before, but the last movement in particular burnt a deep impression on the memory with its streaking wildfire, for within the music it seemed to come from everywhere at once. The players themselves were illuminating the whole interior of the movement with vivid flashes, so that it became like those tall towers of cloud in the Caribbean, which make display at night by their own particular thunderstorms within. Perhaps all this passed through the mind of whoever it was who gave the symphony its name. The conductor was Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt.

BUT what are we to say of the extraordinary story of Haydn's head, which has been told (for the first time, to me) by the *News Chronicle* this week? The story of Mozart's pauper's grave is well known, and commonly taken for a pitiful case, and the *For My Lady* potentialities of the Paganini grave story have never been neglected; yet these have nothing to compare with Haydn's posthumous fortunes.

As briefly as possible, here is the tale: Haydn died in hot weather in May, 1809, and was buried in haste. Prince Esterhazy, his patron and employer, ordered a fine coffin to be made, intending to revoke the common burial and take Haydn's remains to his castle chapel. The coffin was delivered, but the Prince forgot all about it—for 11 years. (Napoleon had reached Vienna a fortnight before and the place was in an uproar.)

Meanwhile, two other friends of Haydn had another amiable design; they went by night to his grave, removed the

head by lamplight, and stole away with a phrenological rarity, which they took to an expert to be measured, analysed, etc.

The 11 years passed, and Esterhazy remembered his intention, and sent for the remains.

When the coffin was opened the head was found to be missing. In the interval, Johann Peter had taken it back (now a skull) from the phrenologist's and made accommodation for it—a little ebony shrine, where it sat on a cushion of white silk, draped with black velvet, under glass. Herr Peter had in kindness lent this ornament to Herr Rosenbaum, and later asked for it back; but Frau Rosenbaum had grown fond of it, and when Herr Peter came to take delivery, she had split her mattress, put the skull inside, and taken to her bed, and was reluctant to alter this situation.

Well, anyway, she did, and gave it up, but by the time Esterhazy's minions traced the head, it was round at Rosenbaum's again. The Prince demanded it, but Rosenbaum took the same view as his wife had formerly done. Anything to please, however, so he gave Esterhazy another. The Prince was not deceived; he knew a phrenologist, too. It was the skull of a young man. Rosenbaum had to send another, and this time Esterhazy was satisfied; but he was wrong. Haydn was at Esterhazy's from the neck down only, even yet. As to the rest he was Herr Meyer.

There were some more goings-on between the Peters and the Rosenbaums and their heirs, but at last the true skull of Haydn was received, with mixed feelings, by the Society of Friends of Music, Vienna, in 1895. There have since been some attempts to reunite the skull and bones, but wars and personal hatreds have thwarted them, and Haydn's head spent the last war in a bank vault. Now it has become a Curtain question. The bones are East, and the skull is West. That is why it is in the news at the moment. The Austrian Peace Treaty is not settled, and the Russians control the road from Vienna to the present Prince Esterhazy, who lives in Budapest. Meanwhile, Haydn's head takes note of all this from its dusty glassed-in tomb in Vienna, and doubtless thinks it an excellent joke. (So, perhaps, does young Meyer.) And as the *News Chronicle* correspondent (Molly Magee) sees it, there is only one thing to be said: Haydn was a most patient man.

THE death of Lady Cunard removes a notable patron of music in Britain, and marks another step away from times and customs no-one expects to see



"The bones are East, the skull is West, and the Russians control the road to Vienna"

again. She was the daughter of E. F. Burke, of New York, married the grandson of one of the founders of the Cunard Line in 1895, and was left a widow in 1925. *The Times* says she was probably the most lavish hostess of her day, and "through her patronage of the best musical talent, at her house might be met, and often heard, practically every musical celebrity, especially at her musical suppers, which were famous." She contributed £1000 to the Imperial League of Opera in 1928, and undeterred by its failure she joined Beecham in founding the New Opera Syndicate in 1933. At her home in Grosvenor Square, the first performance of André Obey's opera *Venus and Adonis* was heard, and at Covent Garden she always occupied what was known as the Omnibus Box, usually surrounded by a host of friends.

But wealth was not all she had to contribute. She had, says *The Times*, "a social gift which combined gracious sympathy with a salty yet never malicious wit. She had friends in all walks of life and was able with little apparent effort to put them at ease with themselves and with one another."

Sacheverell Sitwell, in a personal tribute, says it was a constant delight to watch her wits at play, and "she was at her happiest with an audience of an ambassador or two, a statesman, and a few young persons chosen for their inconsequence. The old would feel young and careless, and the young would feel they were being consulted on affairs of State."

Mrs. Edward Hulton, wife of the owner of *Picture Post*, says, in a curious note: "To be received at her dinner table . . . was a privilege not given to everyone—a fact which will never be forgotten by some of those who were not invited."

Patrons go and patrons come. The new patron of the arts here now is the Arts Council, and any person of any kind can sit at its table—whether in the gallery at Covent Garden, hearing first-rate opera at prices within anyone's reach, or lying in the sun on the grass in Battersea Park, where the exhibition of sculptures (including Henry Moore, Epstein, Rodin, Maillol, and many others) is at present attracting plain ordinary people from Battersea and Clapham who pay a shilling each—innocents who never knew they had been left off the invitation list of one of Lady Cunard's suppers.

—A.A.

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past sins by linking with household goods manufacturers to back a scholarship in domestic design. The want of enlightenment in these directions is patent, and returning students would have some chance of finding support for the exercise of their talents and the practice of their craft.

There is need periodically for a travelling scholarship in sculpture, and it would be ideal if every artist was able to have at least one good look at his country from the outside. But I question whether when it comes to spending a large sum of money mainly intended

to promote healthier conditions in painting in the Dominion it is right to spend the whole of it on sending painters travelling. I question whether it is proper and wise to subsidise the painter while he works outside the country and then let him rot after his return.

The granting of subsidies to enable painters of outstanding promise to devote their full time to their painting in New Zealand may not, from the A.N.Z.A.S. point of view be such a spectacular way of disposing of the funds they have available, but I hope that the Association can be persuaded that to utilise at least 50 per cent. of this money on the home front is the only sensible thing to do.