

WE STILL MAKE MUSIC

By DR. MALCOLM SARGENT

(A talk broadcast from the BBC in the series "Calling Australia")

AS I sit here talking to the Empire, I am naturally thinking of, and visualising, the many friends I have made on my musical tours in New Zealand, Palestine, and most of all, in Australia. I was in Australia when the war broke out, and I now confess that inwardly I was sick with fright as I imagined what might be happening in England, to London, to my friends and relatives. Like everyone else, my chief desire was to get back here as soon as possible, and to endeavour to do something about it, no matter how small.

It is because I have been on the other side of the world in war time that I think I can understand your feelings. I know you are restless, and anxious, and worried by your imagination, and torn at heart by your sympathy for us here.

When I flew back in November, 1939, I expected to find England devastated from air raids, everyone nervous, anxious and war worn. Let me say at once, and you have heard it from others, I did not find it so, nor is it so even now. Since my return, of course, I have seen many changes, seen many surprising things, and have been thrilled by many inspiring examples of fortitude and heroism.

I have conducted concerts many times in most of the big cities in England and Scotland, and those that have come under the blitz always remind me when I visit them of a man who has spent a night of anxiety or hard work, and has not quite had time to shave properly. You know what I mean — they are not as clean and tidy as usual — but there is a sort of grim steadfastness showing that for the moment, life is not all fun and that there are serious jobs to be done and a very serious situation must be faced.

Never So Busy

England, the precious gem, ever set in a silver sea, has indeed become, and looks, every inch a fortress. Her feminine beauty has been perhaps temporarily replaced by a masculine strength. But these things you know. I would rather speak to you of music, of the music we are still making. Let me say this at once, and it may surprise you. Having been busily making music for over 20 years, never have I been so busy, never have I found so much music to make as I have found here in England since this war began. There is a deep-lying and important significant reason for this.

You know, war brings people's emotions to the surface. The Britisher who prided himself on not showing his feelings, not having his heart on his sleeve, finds that in these days his feelings are so strong that he cannot hide them. And if his heart's on his sleeve, perhaps it is of more use to his fellow creatures.

There is no pretence to-day; if you are gay you laugh, if you are sad, the tear comes to the eye.

And why not? Your neighbour has faced and is facing the same situation and he understands. One could never enumerate, and certainly never exaggerate, the good qualities which the war has aroused here. The friendliness, the charity, the bravery, the self-sacrifice — one sees it every day and exemplified in a hundred different ways.

I have always known that the frankly emotional music of the Russians we will say, or the Austrians, or of Finland, has been created because these countries have had to face bitter struggles and persecutions. You see, the man in the street here now is for the first time understanding these outpourings of the spirit, because he is for the first time in a similar situation.

I know this to be true, for I have toured the music halls of England and Scotland with the London Philharmonic Orchestra occupying the complete bill and giving no fewer than twelve Symphony Concerts in each town per week. The halls were almost always packed to capacity, and I have heard shouts of excited rapture from the gallery at the conclusion of a classical symphony which I feel a comedian might well envy.

As Popular As Formby

No remark could please me more than that of one of the stage hands in Glasgow, who, after a concert, said to me: "You know, Doc., you're going over real big; your only rival on the 'alls is George Formby." These concerts have been very exciting. The curtain would rise on the 70 instrumentalists, in full evening dress, each a great artist on his particular instrument, and for the first time, in most cases, hundreds of humble gallery-ites, paying sixpence, who normally would be entertained by the conjuror, the contortionist or the red-nosed comedian — these grand people would listen in rapt attention to two hours of Heaven-sent music, forgetting their worries, forgetting their bomb-shattered houses, forgetting there was a war, their spirits bathed in eternity in imperishable music.

I have had hundreds of letters from strangers telling me how much it has meant to them; one from an airman saying he was on leave resting, his nerves, I believe, a bit the worse for wear from night expeditions during the Dunkirk episode. He said, having heard our music, it had been such a tonic that he was already quite well again, and good for another two years at least.

Hitler Looked Silly

You know, the power of music as a refreshment for the tired spirit or the jaded mind cannot be exaggerated. I remember performing Elgar's "Enigma Variations" at a concert given for the Red Cross in Australia. After the performance, a woman came up to me and said, as she listened to this great music, particularly to the "Nimrod Variations," she felt how silly it made Hitler look.

I was struck by her word "silly." It conveyed so much. You see, she had attained to a real sense of values, and the permanence of the music had made Hitler and swashbucklers seem temporal and feeble, and Elgar had so softened her nature that she felt Hitler to be merely silly.

I was reminded of this last Sunday when I played "Enigma" again to a full house here in London, but since the Australian performance I have witnessed great fires, I have heard whistling bombs, I have seen people sleeping in the underground, my own house has been blasted, and three days later I saw a rescue squad dig up a neighbour of mine — or rather bits of a neighbour of mine — from the debris of a house where he had been buried.

Now I confess that the bitterness of my feelings no longer makes it possible for me to look upon Hitler as merely being silly. But this makes it all the more necessary for us to cling to the purity of music lest our hearts should become hard as steel or cold as ice.

"A Blinking Highbrow"

Well, we will talk of more cheerful things.

After a music hall concert one night a friend of mine went into the next-door pub to see how the gallery was taking it. Over a glass of beer, he got into conversation with a typical British navy.

He said: "Well, what have you been up to to-night?"

"Oh, I've been to the music-hall — I always go on Wednesdays. This week they've got a blooming Symphony Orchestra."

My friend said: "How do you like it?"

The navy replied: "Well, I've never heard one before, but it's great. It's made me a bit thirsty, because I usually go to the bar once or twice during the show when there's a turn I don't like very much, but this time I never left my seat once."

"What did they play?" my friend asked.

"Oh, lots of things, but the big turn was the Tchaikovski something Symphony."

Then our friend in the corduroys added: "You know, there's one thing this ruddy Hitler's done for me. I should never have known, but I've found out to-night I'm a blinkingighbrow."

Now, you see, this really is the point of the success of this tour. So many people who would have been frightened of the usual concert hall have heard the music in their own familiar surroundings and at cheap prices, and have loved it.

When Raids Come

You may wonder what happens when there is an air raid warning. Well, usually nothing. I remember on one occasion receiving intimation from the wings that the enemy were approaching just before we were commencing Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. I turned to the audience, told them the situation, and



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added: "You know we may all be blown sky high; I may be blown sky high, the orchestra, the gallery, but it is wonderful to realise there is only one thing here that cannot be destroyed — it will last forever." I picked up my score of the Symphony and said: "Here it is, the music of Beethoven, and I feel there is nothing better for us to do at this moment than to play it and listen to it."

Well, we could hear the guns and bombs outside, but not a soul stirred for three-quarters of an hour. Never has, I feel, an orchestra played so well, never has an audience listened so intensely. Everyone seemed inspired and was unafraid.

Now you probably know that of course a great feature of England's musical life is her Choral Societies. It is not easy now for them to carry on in normal ways because of the black-out and the evacuation, but this Christmas I have done no fewer than six performances of the "Messiah," always to crowded houses. Here in London the Royal Choral Society, having begun with the Queen's Hall, and this hall is rather draughty just at the moment, gave a concert with a rehearsal of only an hour, but what a wonderful performance — most memorable for those who heard it.

Pity Not Needed

Well, this country of music-making typifies the spirit of the people, but we do not ask your pity. Each one of us here can say with the poet: "Now God be praised who has matched me with this hour." The music of England is not mute, not only the music of her concert halls, but the music of her brooks, her woods, trees, pleasant gardens and green meadows, the song of her high hills; all these mingle with the music of the people's voices, with the music singing in the people's hearts. This is unconquerable, this is eternal.

Here in London one can feel a great singing from the heart of a tear-stained city; a tune which is at one with the greatest poetry and music, an inspired tune breathing of faith and hope. For my part, I look forward in confidence to the time when our faith and hope shall at last be satisfied, and charity — the greatest of these — shall reign once more in the world. And I trust that then I may be allowed to come once more to your hospitable shores, to shake you by the hand and to make music with you. Until then — good-bye.