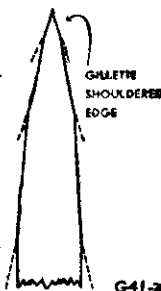


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SOME RECENT MUSIC

No. 7: By MARSYAS

A STUDIO recital which was worth getting excited about came from 2YA this week: "The Elizabethans, Then and Now". It was a selection of three well-known Elizabethan lyrics each presented in two settings—one by an Elizabethan composer, and one by a modern.

Now I have a special predilection for the English composers of the sixteenth century, but recordings of their work are few in proportion to the volume of it, and I have often felt that this serious gap in the record catalogues should be rectified with studio performances. And the recital by Olga Burton, Connie Lee, W. Roy Hill, and Ken Macaulay is the best attempt I have yet heard in this field.

To call it an "attempt" is to do it an injustice from the start, though. These four singers performed Pilkington and Ford better than any of the recorded madrigal singers (save perhaps one remarkable disc of Wilbye's "Sweet Honey-sucking Bees" which I have heard though never on the air). The performance from 2YA was tingling with vitality.

"A voice to a part" is a motto to remember in these polyphonic compositions, and I am now convinced that it is an essential one after the success of the four Wellington singers. Even recordings by the authority on Elizabethan music (Dr. E. H. Fellowes) are not satisfactory. Madrigals were written for the pleasure of the singers, not to be sung by people to people. And it is most important to hear the interplay of clashing melodic lines—a kind of woven texture of melodies rather than a moulded plastic of sound.

That's why these three Elizabethan "ayres" sounded so well—they were sung by four people who have trained themselves as soloists (presumably) and each one knew that he or she was in effect singing a solo part.

As it happened each of the early examples was what is described as an "ayre" and not what we specify as a "madrigal." That is, each verse is repeated to the same music, and there is actually one upper part which attracts the attention more than the others. (Incidentally the Ford ayre was the original setting of the "Purcell" *Passing By* I mentioned three weeks ago).

May I suggest that these singers try "Hard by a Crystal Fountain" (Morley) or "Sweet Honey-sucking Bees" (Weelkes) or, if they can find no copies, look up some of the examples quoted in Burney's *History of Music*. There is a Weelkes setting there of "My Flocks Feed Not" from the "Sonnets to Sunday Notes of Music".

One last point. The two settings of each poem were performed so that we could compare them. There is no comparison. Winifred Bury's "There is a Lady" is competent but watery. She improved on Thomas Ford's metre at the words "doth range her country" but this was the only touch. Peter Warlock's

"Rest Sweet Nymphs" was neurotic, coming after Pilkington's. And Stanford's "Diaphenia" only made me wish they'd given up the time to another Elizabethan.

A WEEK or two ago Eileen Ralph played Alban Berg's Opus 1, a piano sonata in one movement, from 1YA, but I missed hearing it. Since then I have become acquainted with the work through one hearing, and in case it might be of interest to someone who remembers the 1YA broadcast I pass my impressions on. In the first place the novel ingredients so confused my musical palate that I could not detect the classical recipe (in spite of the fact that I am used to most modern styles).

From listening without any prior knowledge of this work the only impression I retained was of a mass of Wagnerish sound displayed pianistically with an occasional glimpse of the Ravel pianoforte style—an odd mixture. I am not partial to pianistic climaxes though (at least not the sort Berg used), and even if I had known what he was getting worked up about I might not have been pleased. Still, there were times when I suddenly realised I was hearing luscious melodies—and once I discovered a really beautiful line in the bass.

Dr. H. C. Colles (music writer of *The Times*) said when he was in New Zealand that he first decided for himself that Berg was a great composer when he heard the Pro Arte Quartet play the "Lyric Suite" from memory (no mean feat with an atonal work). So I would like to hear more music by Alban Berg.

"THIS great tune marvellously depicts the winding river as it follows its picturesque course through the composer's homeland" some fool wrote somewhere about "Moldau" in Smetana's symphonic work *My Country*. What a great bluff programme-music notes are!

We know that Smetana was singing of his affection for the river Moldau (Vltava) when he wrote this tone poem; indeed the little flute passage at the start might be a trickle of spring water at the source. But do we have to accept a Czech folk tune as a picture of a winding river? Presumably if you take a pencil and trace the path of the six-eight crotchets and quavers you'll get a map of the river?

At any rate I missed "Moldau" when it came over 3YA on Friday, and I've never heard it played with an annotation, so perhaps I myself am the only one guilty of passing on this fable. But I can also dispose of it.

Because (at the risk of upsetting my Czech informant) I can quote a literal translation of the popular Czech words of "this great tune," which "marvellously depicts the winding river":

*The cat jumps out the window;
The dog jumps out the window;
If it is not raining—
We will not get wet!*