

English People Are Unmusical

THAT England is not a musical country has often been brought against her as a serious reproach. This is not really just, and is largely due to a want of historical perception on the part of somewhat hasty critics. It is true that for the 200 years extending from about 1675, we went through a kind of musical eclipse—and that just at the time when Germany was rising to her finest heights in musical art by the works of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and others. But, just as winter does not characterise the whole year, so the winter of music in England should not be taken as representative of the national mind.

Certainly this charge of being unmusical was largely contributed to by the attitude of English people themselves. It is characteristic of us to disparage in the realm of art—particularly in music—whatever is of home-growth, and to welcome what is foreign. The preference accorded to foreign music began in the latter part of the reign of Charles I. It was commented upon by Henry Lawes in 1653, thus:—"This present generation is so sated with what's native, that nothing takes their ear but what's sung in a language which, commonly, they understand as little as they do the music."

This exaltation of what was French or Italian grew into a prevailing fashion in Charles the Second's reign; and the introduction of foreign singers, fiddlers and dancers, tended largely to throw English artists, as well as composers, into the shade, for generations. In London, in the latter part of the 19th century, we read that the sign "No Englishman need apply" was written up on the doors of London concert halls, while in 1874, the Irishman Balfe, having written an opera based on Sir Walter Scott's novel "The Talisman," had to have it translated into Italian in order to make it a success in London. It was called "Il Taïsmano," and the cast included Mr. Campbell, who had to call himself "Signor Campobello," and Mr. Green, who was billed as "Signor Brocolini."

THE music of England, however, dates back to early times, and reached a high state of development at an epoch when Continental Europe had scarcely emerged from the Dark Ages. We find historical glimpses of this in the music of the early

is an oft-made but nevertheless unjust accusation—one probably based on the comparative lack of prominence of English music composers. In the following article, a synopsis of a talk given recently by Mrs. Daisy Basham, from 2YA, the statement is severely criticised. "Preference for foreign singers, fiddlers and dancers, grew into a fashion. English artists and composers were thrown into the shade for generations," she asserts.

Bards, who flourished in very remote times. In Wales, every free man carried his harp, and to be seen without it meant disgrace. It was in the disguise of a harper, tradition says, that King Alfred penetrated the camp of the hostile Danes, and learned their strength and their plans. At a later date, we find King Canute improvising a song, inspired by the sunset and the distant vespers at Ely.

MANY of the old "rounds" and "catches" (so-called because one group had to "catch" the tune from another group) date back into the Middle Ages. Such was "Turn Again Whittington," first sung (with other words) in 1453.

England was well advanced in counterpoint long before the beginning of the first Flemish

school. The early English school of counterpoint found its worthiest expression in the works of John Dunstable, who lived in the first half of the 15th century. It has been said that he invented counterpoint, but that art was probably of gradual growth, and due to the work of many men. Dunstable wrote a fairly large number of compositions, and in the British Museum is an enigma (riddle) canon by him, which has not yet been deciphered. Such mathematical music, in which the parts fitted forward or backward, or in more complicated ways, gradually gave way to the madrigals or part-songs, written in contra-puntal style, with melody supporting melody. These, in turn, were followed by the simpler ballads and carols—melody supported by harmony.

HARMONY in singing was customary in Britain long before it was so on the Continent. At the close of the 17th Century, Archdeacon Giraldus writes thus:—"The Britons do not sing their tunes in unison, like the inhabitants of other countries, but in different parts. So that when a company of singers meets to sing, as is usual in this country, as many different parts are heard as there are singers . . . In the northern parts of Britain, and on the borders of Yorkshire, the inhabitants make use of a similar kind of symphonious harmony in singing, but with only 2 varieties of tune and voice—the one murmuring the under part, the other singing the upper, in a manner equally soft and pleasing."

We have but to look in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" to see that the knowledge of music, and the love of song, pervaded all classes. We learn that country squires, in the 14th century, could pass the day in singing or in playing the flute, and that the most attractive accompaniment in a young lady was to be able to sing well, and that it afforded the best chance of her obtaining an eligible husband! Also that the cultivation of music extended to all classes. Knights, as they rode to tourney, sang ballads; indeed it was part of the training of a perfect knight to be a musician. No banquet was complete without music.

ERASMUS, speaking of the English in the reign of Henry VIII, said that they challenged (Concluded on page 17.)

Down to the Sea in Ships

Away to the
Magic of
Tropical Nights
with 3YA

Wednesday 21

tune in to
CHRISTCHURCH

and
away

with the old
Wind-
jammers

