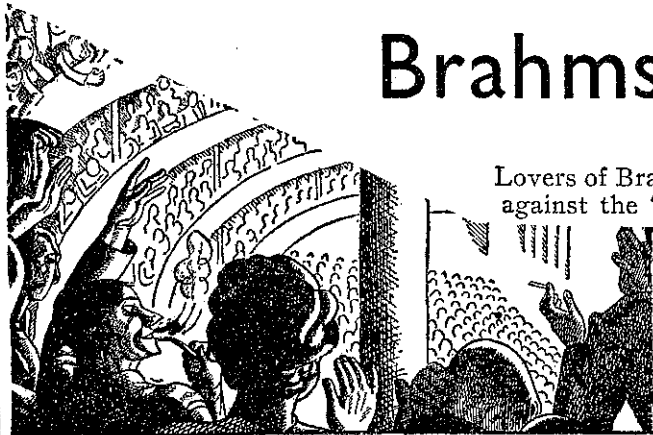


Should We Have Honoured the Brahms Centenary?



Lovers of Brahms's music took up their cudgels last week against the "Pied Piper," who, writing in the "Radio Record," confessed that he could not conjure up any enthusiasm for "this heavy German music." The champions of the famous composer may find the following article, written by Francis Toye for the London "Morning Post," of considerable interest.

WE have not even yet finished the various Brahms Centenary celebrations. One hundred years ago Johannes Brahms was born. This fortunate event was celebrated in anticipation, and on the actual birthday, with remarkable enthusiasm by the English musical world. All the symphonies and the chamber music have been played, and there have been heaven knows how many performances of the "German" Requiem, which, though it contains several movements of great beauty, does not strike all of us as being one of Brahms's very best works.

The lover of music must be warned here and now against allowing a natural reaction against surfeit to prejudice him against the composer honoured. Brahms cannot be held responsible for the excesses of his centenary. He could not foresee our modern crazes. There is a great deal to be said for centenaries, but in recent years there has been an undoubted tendency to work them to death. Nor, I think, do we treat them intelligently. In the case of a popular composer of the first order like Brahms or Schubert, it should surely be the ideal for his more instructed admirers to try to select those of his lesser-known works which, for some reason or other, have not passed into the established repertory, and take advantage of the occasion to make them better known. Instead we are far too inclined merely to reiterate already familiar works.

Moreover, we are not nearly alert enough in celebrating the centenaries of composers who may be classed as belonging to the second order. Such men have nearly always written sufficient compositions of the first order to fill a concert programme, and a centenary would be an ideal occasion to call public attention to them, with a consequent enlargement of the repertory—perhaps the most desirable object possible at the present time.

On the whole, except in the matter of the Requiem, the Brahms Centenary has not been unintelligently observed. Brahms's music is so popular and so familiar in the British Empire at the present time that it would have been exceptionally difficult to discover any considerable

number of compositions which have not already attracted the attention they deserve. There is no necessity, and I doubt in any case if this is the proper place, to attempt any appraisal of Brahms's position in the hierarchy of music. As regards England I have myself witnessed a noticeable change in the approach to him. When I was a student Brahms was essentially the idol of a certain section of musical highbrows known to the irreverent as "The Brahmins." He has not lost that position, but in recent years he has become a popular composer as well. True, his pre-eminence has not been accepted without question. Mr. Newman has assailed his constructive ability; Mr. Cecil Gray has challenged his qualities as a symphonist; Mr. Calvocoressi has repeatedly insisted on the sterilising effect of his influence in music. I do not think, however, that these gentlemen, despite their unquestioned authority, have secured many followers. Brahms to-day shares with Beethoven and Bach the distinction of commanding both popular and intellectual allegiance.

In the circumstances, it may interest even those of my readers who are devoted to Brahms to read an opinion typical of a country in which he is not appreciated as he is here. The French have never admired unreservedly Brahms's music, preferring that of Cesar Franck for spirituality and intellectual depth, that of Mendelssohn for lyrical spontaneity. It is sometimes said that his popular aspect does not appeal to the Latins. I do not think that this is true; it is rather his more serious claims which are denied. Indeed, the following extracts from an article which has been sent to me by a friend as representative of the best French opinion seem to prove as much.

The writer of the article, after a somewhat grudging admission of Brahms's right to a certain position among the great composers and of the supreme merits of the Second Symphony and the Violin Concerto, frankly expresses his preference for the lighter works, the Waltzes, the Intermezzi, and some of the songs. He then proceeds in a quotation from another writer to trace the defects in Brahms's music to certain of his characteristics as a man: (Contd. p. 44.)