

do is to look on and admire. And in the meantime we are gradually losing touch with the great singers. What do opera-goers in this country know of the wonderful voices and the splendid talent of the contemporary international artists to whom America is willing (and able) to pay millions of dollars every season from November until April? How many people on this side of the ocean know the names of these present-day stars, the majority of whom have never sung here at all?

A few of them are perhaps familiar—for instance, the tenor Martinelli; the even more distinguished baritone, Titta Ruffo; the now-famous American tenor, Orville Harrold; the great *soprano leggero* Madame Galli-Curci; that charming singer, Claire Dux; the inimitable Emmy Destinn; besides Frau Frieda Hempel, Miss Geraldine Farrar, Madame D'Alvarez, and the much-praised contralto, Madame Matzenauer. But there are some whose names are utterly unknown here. Who has heard, for example, of Signor Beniamino Gigli, of the Metropolitan Opera House, of whom it has been declared on high authority that 'there is no lyric tenor to-day with a voice more beautiful or a more thorough mastery of the art of the *bel canto*'? No less ignorant are we concerning the rare qualities of Joseph Schwarz, the Russian baritone, said to be 'the most remarkable Rigoletto that ever' &c.; the tenor Muratore, the Italian baritones, Giacomo Rimini and Riccardo Stracciari, the dramatic sopranos, Rosa Raisa and Rosa Ponsella, or the Spanish soprano, Lucrezia Bori. Enough that all these are said to be singers of the first rank, the like of whom we are no longer privileged to listen to at Covent Garden, or, indeed, anywhere else.

Hence it is that I deplore not merely the loss of our lead in operatic matters, which, after all, is only a sentimental question, but the danger of losing our operatic vocal standard, a much more serious thing. That we are unable now—and may not for several years be in a position—to pay the price for these expensive song-birds is obvious enough. Nor are we, happily, compelled to forego the pleasure of listening to opera on that account. We are not exactly pining for operatic stars—far from it. But we must, by hook or by crook, keep up the standard of our singers, and it behoves our native companies, old and new, to avail themselves of the very best talent that they can afford to engage.

This aspect of the question was pointedly dealt with in the admirable article by Mr. H. C. Colles, entitled 'Opera in England,' which appeared in *The Times* of December 10. He believes that we have enough native talent in the country to make the best operatic artists we can wish for, but that very little of it seems ever to arrive at its destination on the stage. 'There is a hitch somewhere,' and he wisely adds, 'only by removing this hitch, whatever it may be, and beginning to make intelligent and consistent use of the native talent available, will it be possible to face the accusation of "lost standards" without flinching.'

THE BACH-ELGAR FUGUE

BY HARVEY GRACE

Not often is an orchestral work so immediately and emphatically a popular success as Elgar's version of Bach's C minor Fugue has proved to be. So far it has been included in three* programmes at Queen's Hall; on the first and third occasions it was repeated in answer to a vociferous encore, and on the second its reception was sufficiently enthusiastic to have justified a repetition had the conductor been that way inclined. Indeed, at the third concert one felt there was a little danger of an encore becoming a convention as it was for so long with the Jarnfelt *Praeludium*, the Dvorák *Humoresque*, and the *Solemn Melody*.

This warm reception of a Bach Fugue by two widely different types of audience—the first and third concerts were of the Goossens series, and the second a London Symphony concert—suggests a few reflections on the principle of transcription, and on the anomalous position in this country of some of the finest music Bach ever wrote. The latter point arises through the surprising fact that the Fugue was obviously unfamiliar to many of the audience.

First, however, something may be said in reply to the mere handful of critics who shook their heads and turned down their thumbs. So far as their adverse judgment was based on their dislike of the music itself, or on their objection to certain details of the scoring, we hear them with respect. No piece of music, and no method of orchestration is for every palate, and all one can do in such cases is to express sympathy with those whose fastidious taste rejects fare which practically all the other musicians present absorbed with gusto.

But when some of these critics condemn Elgar's version of the Fugue as 'vandalism' they are on ground where they may be challenged. They should make it clear whether the 'vandalism' lies in the details of the scoring or in the mere act of transcription. Probably most of the objections are on the former ground. We have heard the question 'What are the big drum and cymbals, the triangle and glockenspiel, and the harp and tambourine doing in a Bach fugue?' It would be as reasonable to ask what they are doing in the orchestra. Who is to say what compositions should be barred to them? The objection recalls the comment of a Paris Conservatoire professor when d'Indy asked him what he thought of Franck's Symphony: 'That a symphony?' (contemptuously); 'My dear sir, who ever heard of writing for the cor Anglais in a symphony? Just mention a single symphony by Haydn or Beethoven introducing the cor Anglais . . . Franck's music may be whatever you please, but it certainly will never be a symphony!'

If the purists object to the transcription as such, they have but a poor case, seeing that the principle has been sanctioned by time and by the practice of all the great composers. There is no need to labour the point that Bach himself was an old

* A fourth performance has been given since this was written.

hand at transcription. It will suffice to remind ourselves that a fair portion of his activities in this way were in connection with the organ. In addition to the batch of vocal solos which he changed into chorale preludes (a group that includes the popular *Sleepers, wake!* piece), he made keyboard versions of his own Violin Fugue in G minor and of about twenty String Concertos by Vivaldi and others—making extensive alterations and repairs in some of the material, the old vandal! As an instance of a move in the opposite direction we have the *Adagio* of the third Trio-Sonata for organ (or pedal clavicembalo), which he afterwards arranged for flute, violin, and clavier. That his transcriptions were usually from concerted instruments to a solo instrument of the keyboard type was no doubt due to the practical reason that the latter guaranteed more frequent (and better) performance.

Nor are modern orchestral versions of Bach's organ works scarce. Sir Henry Wood's arrangements of some of the Trio-Sonata movements and of the Toccata in F have long been popular at Queen's Hall. Wetzler has arranged for full orchestra the whole of the Trio-Sonata in E flat. Two Germans, whose names I forget, have scored the Passacaglia and the Toccata in F. Even military bands have begun to play the organ works. I heard recently of a fine performance of the 'great' G minor Fugue by one of our crack bands at Queen's Hall at a Saturday evening concert, given (I think) by the Polytechnic. And a well-known North of England musician tells me that he has in hand some arrangements of the organ fugues for brass bands. So far from creating a dangerous precedent, then, Sir Edward is merely following a well-established custom. Yet who would think so, reading such a comment as this:

... that strange example of bad taste—the Elgar orchestrated version of Bach's Fugue in C minor, for organ. These megaphone devices may be, indeed are, clever; but after all Bach knew *something* about orchestral composition, and if he had felt his work orchestrally, he could have employed that medium for its expression. The thing is clever, but indecent.

Now this was written by a critic who has been attending London concerts for years. Over and over again he must have heard such things as Wood's orchestral versions of the Bach Toccata, the Trio-Sonata movements, Moussorgsky's *Picture Gallery*, Arcadelt's *Ave Maria*, Rachmaninov's C sharp minor Prelude, Raff's Cavatina, &c., &c., and transcriptions by various people of Weber's *Invitation to the Valse*, the *Bee's Wedding* and *Spring Song*, of Mendelssohn, Chopin's Funeral March, and others too numerous to mention. Most of these composers 'knew something about orchestral composition'—rather more than Bach, some of them, for obvious reasons; has this critic protested against any of these transcriptions as 'megaphone devices,' 'bad taste,' 'indecent'?

Apparently what has caused the outcry from a few purists is the freedom with which Elgar has treated the Fugue. His version bears much the

same relation to an ordinary musical transcription as a free translation of a book bears to a literal one. Nobody pretends that the latter has any value beyond a scholastic or some other utilitarian purpose. The greater its literal fidelity to the original the less likely is it to be of any artistic importance. We should go too far if we asserted that the rule held good in musical transcription, but we may safely say that it applies far more than is generally realised. A transcription that *sounds like* a transcription is so far a failure. Had this Bach fugue been transcribed for orchestra on the ordinary 'safe' lines, it would still have been a fine piece of music, and therefore enjoyable, but we should not have been able to forget its origin. We should have been conscious all the time that we were listening to a work that had been haled from the dusk of the organ-loft into the fierce light of the concert-room. The flavour of the 'voluntary' might have been so pronounced as to set ecclesiastically minded laymen among the audience feeling for threepenny bits. The supreme merit of the Elgar version is that its idiom is that of the orchestra, and therefore one gets an impression of a work conceived for orchestra. Yet with all its sumptuous decoration, it contains no note that is not present or implied in the original. The strong harmonic basis and the sinewy counterpoint of Bach are never obscured, hence there is not the feeling of a misfit that results from (say) a folk-tune harmonized with *outré* chords. Thus, when for the original



Elgar gives us



the passage is essentially the same, plus a flash produced by the whip-up of the violins and wood-wind. And equally justifiable (if such good things ever need justification) is this brilliant bit of figuration a few bars later, where, against Bach's



given out by the brass, we have this flourish by the strings and part of the wood-wind:



The score contains many such passages, but it should be noted that the sense of growth which is a feature of the fugal form is maintained by such decorative treatment being reserved until the movement is well under way, and even then its richest application is held back until the *da capo*.

One is tempted to touch on other purple patches, e.g., the amazing demisemiquaver passage for trumpets a few bars before the end (a passage which looks impossible and is no doubt difficult, but which has 'come off' brilliantly on each of the five times I have heard the work); the delicious scurry down the scale by the flutes and piccolo against a harp *glissando* in tenths just before the middle section; the dramatic treatment of the little chromatic counter-theme in this portion; the shakes for the brass and the use of the percussion just before the *da capo*, and (too small to be called a patch, but a very impressive point) the first ominous boom of the big drum at the last entry of the subject before the middle section; and so on. In fact, the exposition once plainly delivered, something is always happening. And, knowing old Bach's fondness for experiments in registration and other means of obtaining colour, we may fairly assume that he would have enjoyed every bit of it. Not a hair would he turn at the triangle and tambourine which have so shocked the purists; and as for the glockenspiel, it would merely remind him pleasantly of that which was attached to his Weimar organ, and which he stipulated should be kept in order—and not for mere show, we may be certain!

Spitta says that the greatest of Bach's organ works are the only instrumental essays that are sufficiently grand in conception and perfect in form to be placed beside the symphonies of Beethoven, and, on the whole, the contention is sound. Nevertheless, how many musicians are really familiar with them? What should we think of the musical state of a country in which Beethoven's Symphonies were never heard in concert-halls save in the form of pianoforte solo arrangements? Yet that is the case with Bach's organ works.

When will London follow the example of Paris in this matter? There one may occasionally find an orchestral programme including an organ solo—say, a Bach or Franck work. At Queen's Hall we may hear a pianoforte, violin, 'cello, even a flute solo, but never one on the organ. Yet it is reasonable to suppose that a public which enjoys the '48, the Suites, the Partitas, and the *Brandenburg* Concertos would take no less delight in the organ works of the composer, seeing that the best of it shows him at his height. As it is, only the handful of concert-goers who happen also to be church-goers or attendants at organ recitals have a chance of hearing these splendid works on the instrument for which they were written. This is another way of saying that they never really hear them at all, for the pianoforte arrangements necessarily fail to reproduce the characteristics that make them so fine on the organ—the sustained tone in the long chains of suspensions, the unyielding pedal points, and the

tonal weight the music calls for, specially in the bass. Only an instrument of such ample scale as a big modern organ can answer all these demands. The real greatness of the best of Bach's organ music will never be grasped by the public until it is frequently performed at concerts either as organ solos or transcribed for orchestra.

It is arguable, indeed, that the latter form is to be preferred in the case of a few of the biggest of these works. Even the most enthusiastic organist must feel at times that, fine as the instrument is, it cannot do full justice to such gigantic conceptions as the 'Wedge' Prelude and Fugue, the 'Great' G minor, the B minor, and a few others. An organ of the right ample resources is rare save in buildings so large and resonant that, if the music is played with the power and pace it so often demands, the details are lost. On the other hand, if we decide that the beauty of the polyphony must be shown we can do so only by the adoption of a steady *tempo* and quiet registration, in which case the impetus of the music is destroyed and its fire damped down. Pianoforte transcriptions do at least retain the animation of the original, though they lose almost everything else. No medium but the orchestra can show to the fullest advantage all the great qualities of these works—their brilliance, texture, growth, and climax. Only when one has heard the Elgar version of the C minor Fugue a few times does he fully realise that Bach's grandest organ music is immeasurably greater than its medium. It can carry the panoply of modern orchestration with ease, and gain in the process, whereas some modern works so treated are merely smothered, and shown to be essentially small, e.g., Weber's *Invitation to the Valse*, as orchestrated by Weingartner. If we feel this in the case of the C minor Fugue—which, be it remembered, is one of the shorter organ works—what a revelation would be some of the biggest, treated with similar skill! I have heard this Elgar transcription called 'a blazing indiscretion.' Well, we sit through so much music that merely smoulders, or at most gives out an occasional spark, that we may thank Heaven for some that blazes, even at the cost of head-shaking among the purists—indeed, the latter is an additional ground for thankfulness. Let us hope that Sir Edward has a few more 'indiscretions' of the same kind up his sleeve. Given music so vital and treatment so brilliant as in this case, we can do with lots of such 'vandalism.'

THE ORIGIN OF 'SAMSON AND DELILAH'

BY CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

(Authorised translation by Fred Rothwell)

Some years ago an old melomaniac who was in the habit of visiting me called my attention to the subject of Samson, with a view to the production of an oratorio—a form of music which at the time was in considerable favour. Owing to modern progress, this is a form which can no