

Extra Supplement: The Competition Festival Record November 1, 1922

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The

Competition Festival Record

No. 171.

THE BLACKPOOL FESTIVAL—Oct. 16-21.

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)

A QUITE hopeless task confronts the chronicler of this meeting. Events proceeding simultaneously in as many as half-a-dozen halls from 9 o'clock in the morning to 5 o'clock, and then with a brief break running in the great Pavilion from 6 or 6.30 until after 10 o'clock give a faint idea of the concentration of purpose and endeavour connoted in the words 'Blackpool Festival.' The crowds which used to assemble in the latter half of the week are now evident in full force on the opening day, and this year the enthusiasm of the audience 'came to the boil' very much earlier than in former times, and by the closing days the pressure-gauge certainly stood higher than ever before. Attention, then, may be directed to the events of outstanding prominence, and had best be recorded in the form of a diary. On the first day the most vital item was the competition (the first of its sort ever held anywhere, said Dr. R. R. Terry) in which the solo writing of the Elizabethans was utilised in the endeavour to make our contemporaries understand that this stuff, so far from being merely antiquarian matter, was in very truth a vital force and destined to exercise as energising an influence on study and practice as any of the numerous 'fertilizing agencies' so much talked about nowadays. The singers of these very modern 'Ayres' of old John Dowland played their own accompaniments on a grand pianoforte from a score based on the lute tablature in use when the music was written, and generally played with marked discretion. Rightaway one was made acquainted with a feature which became increasingly evident during the week—memorised work. Some of these girls singing the Tudors were Margaret Coopers at the pianoforte. They sang and played to us with a simplicity and ease in marked contrast to the usual platform manner, and were the more to be commended because they had no models to follow, only their own innate sense of musical feeling serving as a guide. We have not heard the last of this sort of thing. Publishers are at work, and where Blackpool leads other Festivals will follow, and our Elizabethans will in a few years possess the land in a very real sense. The adult folk-dancing had an honoured place in the Monday evening programme; by its very nature it will be preserved from the merely spectacular. As the intricacies of its technique become as familiar to the audience as to the dancers, its popularity with the former will steadily increase; but in any normally constituted assembly the desire must surely arise to participate rather than look on, especially in the country dances, which took their rise purely from the social conditions of the life of their time and district. Here again, as in the Tudor solo work, we felt instinctively that we were standing on the verge of tremendous possibilities—virgin land waiting for development.

On the second day we were enabled to some extent to sample the type of results flowing from our existing system of pianoforte and violin teaching. Here is surely matter far beyond the provision of an incentive for the juvenile heart and mind. Teaching methods have, like most other things, grown up in this country in more or less haphazard fashion. What sense is there in entering for a violin competition a girl or boy who is not able to tune a fiddle without assistance? It is such wrong-headed work which makes us wonder what degree of competence is behind the teaching. Whilst writing thus, one does not lose sight of the fact that many more come to learn than to teach, and that only thus do competitive Festivals justify an existence; but more judgment will have to be exercised in entering those who must be known to be really incompetent. Juvenile pianists seemed to me to shape with much greater success at some short Bach studies than at two short sections from Schumann's 'Waldscenen.' Julius Harrison's 'Pixie Man' again seemed to snare the interest of the kiddies more successfully than some simple Mozart extracts. Adult tastes and affinities are bad enough to judge, but youngsters' predilections are past finding out, and safety would seem to lie only in prescribing a course of Festival test-pieces spread over a number of years (could one be sure that the youngsters would come forward consistently during such a period), which would secure some really all-round acquaintance with composers that matter.

Other features of this second day were male-voice singing in small choirs which would be completely out-classed in the great open classes on the closing day. These probationary classes are meant to serve as feeders for the larger ones, and bodies of men came from as far afield as Coventry. This body of railwaymen (for such proved to be their employment) greatly distinguished themselves in two widely-contrasted works by Bantock and Elgar. Again memorised singing was the rule and not the exception. Dr. Terry was at great pains to drive home the point that brainy interpretation was little good unless the voices could respond to such demands. Wittily he remarked that a choir which combined all these qualities was the one we were all hoping to join some day.

Orchestral playing at these big northern festivals has languished in comparison with choral work. Committees have tried again and again to stimulate this branch, and the solution appears to be in the direction of prescribing works for strings and single wind with timpani. Here Saint-Saëns's Overture, 'La Princesse Jaune,' was played by five bands of thirty-five players, who were allowed the assistance of a couple of professionals. With one exception, a distinctly high level was attained and maintained. If

this response may be taken as a fair sample, then salvation lies in the direction of encouraging the small orchestra rather than the full one. Honours went to a local band making an initial appearance under the direction of Mr. Percy Dayman.

The third and fourth days brought a great assembly of solo singing aspirants accompanied by still greater crowds of hearers. Four song-cycles were heard on Wednesday and two more on Thursday, the former day also giving us a series of duets and quintets from Mozart's 'Così fan tutte.' These duets varied enormously in quality, and made one wonder on what principles some had entered. Where women sang together the results were often really delightful for even blasé ears, but rarely was the man well-mated with woman or *vice versa*. The quintets were heard on the Pavilion stage with scenery, costumes, and appropriate lighting, accompanied by pianoforte. Mr. Austin, as a widely experienced operatic singer, brought the highest qualifications to the task of discrimination, not the least being a sympathy bred of a full first-hand knowledge of the problems confronting amateurs. Mozartian stage deportment must have grace and repose. Whatever our Northerners may do in the ball-room, these qualities were not conspicuously present on Wednesday evening. Stiff acting goes ill with the nimble music of Mozart, and more pleasure came to the hearer who followed the score rather than watched the stage. Yet with these defects the measure of accomplishment was much ahead of a similar class in 1913.

(Our correspondent's description of the solo and choral singing, and a list of the chief results, will appear in next month's issue.)

SALTAIRE.—The annual choral competition under the auspices of the Co-operative Choral Association took place at Saltaire on September 30, this being the first occasion on which it has been held in the Airedale district of Yorkshire. Dr. E. C. Bairstow awarded the Association Challenge Shield to Accrington Church Choir for its singing of 'April is in my mistress face' (Morley), and 'An Evening Scene' and 'Go, song of mine' (Elgar). Of the male-voice choirs, that from Barrowford was awarded first place.

BRIGHOUSE.—The second Competitive Festival held at Brighouse occupied three days in the opening week of October. There were crowded audiences, and the standard reached by the competitors aroused the enthusiasm of the adjudicator, Mr. R. H. Wilson, who had a warm word of praise for the children's choirs. Besides solo contests for soprano, contralto, tenor, bass, pianoforte, and violin, there were classes for choir-boys, elementary school choirs, and church choirs.

MEXBOROUGH.—The Competitive Festival held on October 6 and 7 was a success, both artistically and financially. In twenty-six classes there were over two hundred entries, representing about fifteen hundred competitors. The test-pieces included works by fourteen British composers, which fact drew appreciative comment from Dr. J. F. Staton, who was assisted in adjudicating by Mr. Maurice Unwin and Madame Edith Hands. There was only one entry in the senior violin class, and it is suggested that this scarcity may be because young string-players can now command such remuneration in cinemas that they do not bother to pursue their studies into more advanced spheres. The first prize for full orchestra went to Barnburgh Main, conducted by Mr. W. Williams, whose Don Valley String Band also headed its own class. With his fine choir from Dodworth, near Barnsley, Mr. H. Riding once more won the shield for male voices. After keen competition with the Oxford Road Choir, Mexborough, the premier place in the mixed-voice class was secured by the Rawmarsh and Parkgate Choral Society, trained by Mr. A. G. Steel.

MANCHESTER.

Three important competitive Festivals have followed each other on three successive Saturdays here. The second annual Manchester Musical Festival, held on September 23, showed a distinct advance on the previous one, both in attendances and in the number of competitors, who totalled over a thousand, arranged in ten classes. Miss Dickens (Droylsden) was awarded the challenge cup presented by Trinity College, London, for the most artistic individual performance of the day. The choral singing reached a fair, rather than a high standard. Dr. Brearley's Contest Choir, Blackburn—the sole entrants in the Madrigal class—was awarded the Gentlemen's Glee Club's Cup for fine performances of Munday's 'Lightly she trippeth' and Callcott's 'O snatch me swift.' This choir also secured premier honours in the mixed-voice section, the test-piece being Bach's 'Rest here in peace' ('St. John' Passion); Todmorden Glee and Madrigal Society being placed second. Of the six male-voice choirs which sang C. Jenkins's 'Sea Fever,' Crossley Motors, Gorton, gained the first position, and the Greetland Vocal Union, Halifax, the second. Seven church and chapel choirs were also heard in 'Greater love hath no man' (Ireland) and Wesley's 'O Lord my God' (unaccompanied), Hazel Grove Wesleyan, last year's winners, retaining the Fairfield Challenge Cup. The judges were Mr. R. W. Baker, Dr. T. Keighley, Mr. W. S. Nesbit, Dr. A. W. Wilson, and Mr. R. H. Wilson.

On September 30 the third annual Manchester and District Choir Eisteddfod brought a crowded audience and singers from all parts to the Free Trade Hall. To stimulate native art, the choral pieces were all written by Welshmen. The large monetary prizes in the chief choral class for seventy voices attracted choirs from the Principality and the Potteries. The technical difficulties of 'The God of Dreams' (J. Owen Jones), which proved too exacting for the Welsh choirs, were overcome with apparent ease by their English confrères. In the course of the day prizes were won by May Bank (Stoke-on-Trent); Manchester Orpheus; St. John's Wesleyan, Weaste; and Talk-o'-th'-hill, Staffs (junior). Dr. D. Vaughan Thomas, Mr. E. T. Davies, Mr. Ivor Owen, and Mr. H. M. Dawber were the adjudicators.

The Belle Vue Choral Contests attained their majority on October 7. Seventeen church and chapel choirs were heard in Wesley's 'O Lord my God' (unaccompanied) and 'The Lord is loving unto every man' (Garrett). After a keen contest Hesketh Lane, Southport, came first; Bedford Wesleyan, Leigh, second; and Radcliffe Bridge Wesleyan, third. The tests for the mixed-voice choirs of fifty voices proved to be melodious rather than crucial—Bantock's setting of the Scotch lullaby, 'O can ye sew cushions,' forming a pleasant foil to Benet's madrigal, 'All creatures now are merry-minded.' Seven choirs competed, and premier honours—for the third year in succession—fell to Stocksbridge Choral Union (Dr. W. M. Robertshaw), second place to Atherton Baptist (Mr. George Meadows), and third to Ryecroft Vocal Society, Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Jack Ramsden). A strong quintet of judges was provided in Dr. T. Keighley, Mr. W. S. Nesbit, Dr. A. W. Wilson, Mr. John Holgate, and Mr. R. W. Baker.

DIARY OF COMPETITIONS—1922.

LONDON SEMI-NATIONAL EISTEDDFOD (Central Hall, Westminster).—November 16. Mr. D. B. Jones, 24, Distin Street, Lambeth, S.E.11.

NORTH LONDON (Northern Polytechnic, Holloway).—November 17-25. Mr. John Graham, 74, Park Hall Road, East Finchley, N.2.

HALIFAX.—November 24, 25. Mr. J. E. Hoyle, 14A, Crossley Street, Halifax.

COLNE.—December 1, 2. Mr. Robert Hartley, 17, Higgin Street, Colne.

HARTLEPOOL.—December 26. Mr. Fred Franks, 65, Thornton Street, West Hartlepool.