

## OVERTURE

This book, small as it is, might never have been written but for the fortuitous persistence of certain editors. First to *start the hare* was the editor of *Reynolds' News*. "A series of articles" was his invitation—"anything you care to give us; you've plenty to write about." I accepted.

Little did I know what lay behind that genial editor's tortuous mind. Little did I dream that he was really out to draw me on the subject of the Orpheus Choir. His approach had all the wheedling subtlety of the trained diplomat. Perhaps he realised that, since I had been engaged for 40 years and more in slanging the Orpheus Choir, the idea of writing about it would not appeal to me. "Of course, it's your pigeon," I was told. That is one of the penalties one has to pay for not being a failure; the cobbler is expected to stick to his last for all eternity. It is never suggested that the cobbler, away from his last altogether, may be, and often is, a much more entertaining fellow. I was not to be caught in that snare. So it came that my first articles to *Reynolds'* smelt not at all of the last, nor did they smell of leather.

They were, I hope, good articles, happy articles, interesting articles. "Excellent," said he of the cloven hoof, "but our readers *do* want something about the Choir." In my bones I felt it coming. I did not like it. We sparred about for a time. Finally, the editor won. It was not a complete victory, for I too have a wily streak in me. What I gave him was a kind of a get-out, nothing more indeed than a series of sketches of musical adventures and misadventures covering the four-and-a-half years *preceding* the start of the Orpheus.

This book is simply an expansion of those sketches, with the addition of several new chapters including the one you are now reading.

In the matter of writing, I am, I must confess, congenitally lazy. All the more reason, therefore, have I to thank the editor of *Reynolds'* for pinning me down to this particular job. It had always been a thing I intended to do, but I am certain it never would have been done but for the spur of that editor's terrifying persistence.

Later on, another editor (the editor of *Chapbook*) started to fish in the same dark and troubled waters. "What about *the riddle of the Orpheus?*" he said.

"What riddle?" I replied.

"Well, how do you account for it?"

"For what?"

"For the *Orpheus*."

"I don't."

So it went. But he was a persuasive sort of a chap, and one, moreover, starting out on a very daring adventure, nothing less than the launching of a new literary periodical. Remembering how, once upon a time, I had started out myself on a job every bit as daring, and certainly a thousand times more perilous, and how thankful I had been in those far-off days for any little encouragement that came my way, I succumbed. The editor got his article.

Now, after many days, and just as if it had been made to order, the same article bobs up to find a haven here. Not that it is specially needed here, but that it might help to quench the thirst of those Orpheus fans who prefer to have their *Orpheus* neat. A mere thimblefull this is, I grant you, but it is all I have to offer of the real Orpheus vintage for the time being. Some day, in the sweet by-and-by, I may find myself once again under the iron heel of editorial demands. Struggle I shall, but, in the end, I know I'll have to capitulate; for there is no fight left in me.

What follows should rightly be at the end of the book. I make no apology. If the cart would seem to be in front of the horse, does it really matter, since the astute reader can, by skipping what remains of this chapter, by-pass the cart (so to speak) and go right into the saddle, boots an' spurs an' a'. Here then is the *Riddle article*, and may all your riddles be easy ones, like this.

#### THE RIDDLE OF THE ORPHEUS

The story of the Orpheus is a fairy-tale, like Cinderella, only it's true. It started in a dunny (we called it a basement) in Rottenrow, and that was 44 years ago. The exact moment when the glass slipper appeared, I cannot say. But it appeared; and lo, the tatterdemalions of the Rottenrow sallied forth. Before long they were holding court. Yes, and to kings and princes and peers as well as to commoners.

The Orpheus is now in its fifth decade. To-day it has countless friends. A few enemies as well, maybe. But none of them, friends or enemies, would ever suggest that the reputation of the Orpheus was built on ialderals, or fine talking, or airy promises.

Someone recently described the Orpheus as the only exportable musical product which Scotland possesses. Be this as it may, it is certainly exportable; for there is no part of the English-speaking world where, to-day, the Orpheus would not be welcomed.

"Glasgow," said an American to one of our city magnates who was on a visit to the States—"why, that's the place the choir comes from." It is in very truth. Now, why is all this thus?

Singing is not a gift peculiar to Scotland. There are other centres in Britain with far richer singing traditions. Is it the Clyde, or George Square, or the slums, or the Saltmarket that spins this aura over our unworthy heads? The question must go unanswered, but the fact remains, the fact that the Orpheus, for some

reason or another, is in the happy position of being singled out everywhere for nation-wide recognition. And that is part of the riddle. Is it what we sing? or how we sing? or both? or neither?

And the people who fill our halls! What sort of people are they? That question can be answered. All sorts of people, high and low, rich and poor, tutored and untutored, poets and plumbers, painters and plasterers, authors, musicians, artists and artisans, the man in the shop, the man in the street, judges and joiners, cabinet ministers and cabinet makers, priests and printers, farmers and farriers, butchers and bakers and candlestick makers—we count them all, and many more, amongst our friends. Our London patrons range from Mile-End to Mayfair; our Glasgow ones from Keppoch-hill to Kelvinside.

How all this came to pass is beyond me to explain. But it came to pass. Every day in life my post-bag confirms it. Every day in life I feel humbled in the face of it all.

And it started in Glasgow, dear old smoky Glasgow, which still provides us with our largest audiences (over 20,000 each concert season), and in which our oldest and, in many respects, our best friends still dwell. True, there is another Glasgow; for Glasgow has suburbs, and suburbs often have snobs. The type is well-known. At times we get square with it. For the type travels. So do we. We meet it regularly at concerts in England and Ireland. It often comes into the side-room, a surprised and puzzled look on its face. It speaks—"I had no idea the Orpheus was like this." How *could* it possibly have any idea?

Which reminds me of the two very canny Scots in the side-room at the close of an Orpheus concert in the Carnegie Hall, New York. After they had nearly pumped my hand off my arm, I asked them if they had enjoyed the concert. Again the perplexed look, and,

again, the speech—"Ye see, we didna manage to get to the concert the night; there was a committee meetin' on at the Caledonian Society." I saw.

And that, in turn, reminds me of something in a happier vein. It would appear that, deservedly or no, the Orpheus is almost universally regarded as the choirs' choir. Nothing is more touching to us than the loyalty of choirs everywhere. In England, particularly, the Orpheus is regarded in almost a legendary way.

Apropos, it was four English choirs (Blackpool, Blackburn, Barrow in Furness, and Sale) who some years ago travelled to Glasgow at their own expense simply to be with us, to sing to and with us, to fraternise. The function was quite private. Few who were present at the meeting will ever forget it. Each choir sang for half an hour. The Orpheus wound up. Then all five choirs joined in the "Hallelujah Chorus," "There is an Old Belief," and "Jerusalem." Filing down, arm in arm, to the Central Station in the late evening, many of those fine English girls were in tears. They talk of it to this day.

A curious thing happened at that gathering. Each of the Conductors had to speak; so had our President (F. H. Bisset) and our Vice-President (Rosslyn Mitchell). Well, the speaking (and the speakers were no novices) was an utter flop. Words simply would not come, could not come. It was not a time for speaking; it was a time for silence. Hearts were too full for words. There's a garland for England, if you like—a deserved one!

Some months later, speaking of this unique gathering at an English conference, I remarked that I had only one regret, this, that such a memorably-beautiful gesture had come from England and not from Scotland; whereupon Sir Wm. Hadow rose and thanked me graciously for my left-handed compliment to the "auld enemy."

In fairness to my ain folk I ought to refer to an equally-memorable tribute paid to us by the choirs of the West of Scotland. This took the form of a great Ceilidh in

Saint Andrew's Hall, the hall filled by choristers. It was of the singing at this Ceilidh that the Duchess of Montrose (present as a guest) said that it seemed to her as if the very heavens had opened.

You will have gathered by this time that the Orpheus is a very real body. It is. Therein lies its strength. Therein lies its great human appeal.

That wireless has played a large part in the Choir's popularity goes without saying. Our singing, nowadays, is heard the wide world over.

It was a befurred trapper from the frozen North who, at a festival in Montreal, told me that he had taken a vacation simply to meet me and to give thanks for the Orpheus Choir. "How do you do it?" he said. I told him I did not know. Nor do I.

I might have told him that there are a hundred of us, that he and others like him are never far from our thoughts when we are on the air, that our singing is very real to us, that we believe fervently in the heart being "the part ay that makes us right or wrang," that we prepare ourselves sedulously so that the heart may speak aright; that there exists amongst us an *esprit-de-corps* founded on real affection, that what he (the trapper) gets from us in the frozen North is music plus the warmth that comes from that kind of human fellowship. All this my friend had already sensed. Did we not talk as if we had known each other all our lives? That is the Orpheus—friendly, neighbourly, the "common touch" if you like to put it that way. Anyhow, to quote an old Scots proverb—"The proof o' the puddin's the preein' o't."

No; there is no riddle about the Orpheus. To the super-sophisticated there may be; to millions of other people everywhere it seems to be crystal clear.