

II

BACKGROUND

Pavilions, pagodas, temples, collonades, kiosks, marbled courts, fountains, cascades, balconies, roof-gardens, terraced promenades, towers and minarets, and the sun shining from a cloudless sky day after day, week after week. Where?

Gay crowds, streaming from stations, quays, and tram-cars, endless throng, rich, poor, old, young, straw-bashed blades, flounced and parasoled coquettes, one song on their lips—"Let us haste to Kelvingrove." That was Glasgow in 1901. Never such a summer. Never such an Exhibition. Never such cordial Internationality.

Gondoliers straight from the Grand Canal at Venice (gondolas and all), Slavs and Tartars, Teutons, Froggies, Italians, Dutch, Belgians, Danes, Americans, Indians, Chinese, Burmese, a' kinds frae a' the airts the win' can blaw; whites, blacks, in-betweens; parading, tirading, babbling, rabbling, mooning, spooning, switchbacking, waterchuting; and all under the shadow of lordly Gilmorehill. The Groveries of 1901. Blessed memory.

And the bands! Blue Hungarians, Red Roumanians, Pied Pomeranians, and other Anians and Arians too numerous to mention, all colours and breeds. Half breeds too, for, in many of the smaller so-called Continental bands, the same familiar Glasgow (or Soho) faces kept cropping up, fiddling or double-bassing or clarionetting, or flootering for all they were worth; the garish uniforms but external habilaments signifying little, and certainly not concealing the fact that the man's the gowd for a' that.

Amongst the big bands (the thoroughbreds), and they came from all parts of the world, was a military band from Germany, the Berliner Philharmonische Blas

BACKGROUND

Orchester, its conductor, a fiery dark-skinned Teuton, Herr Moser. The players, appearing as they did in frock coats and tile hats, looked for all the world like a conglomerate of Auchtermuchty elders. They played with terrific earnestness, and although not by any means the best band (tonally) of the Exhibition, they had a flair, a character, a purpose greater than that of any other of the crack combinations. That flair, that character, that purpose came clearly from their conductor. Here was a discovery, an important one, especially to a conductor in the making like myself.

More interested, as I was, in music than in deportment, I had, for some time, been coming round to the view that a conductor, however elegant, should be able to do a great deal more than beat time. I had seen most of the conductors from Richter on, and I was still looking for *something more*, for the conductor who would completely gather into himself not only the bare bones (with elegancies if you like) of the music, but the spirit and the poetry as well, the inner life, the shape, the architecture, the unity that brings everything under one arc of thought. That is what Herr Moser was after. That he did not always attain it is beside the point. He was always after it, and it must be remembered that a military band, as his was, has not the elasticity of an orchestra. His awareness of the conductor's function was the thing that mattered to me. In his hand a baton ceased to be a merely decorative or a pedantic thing; it became a living thing, significant, eloquent. In short, Herr Moser, obviously loving his music much better than he loved himself, could not help showing it.

Later in my life, Nikisch and, still later, Toscanini came along to impress on me that what I had been seeing was, verily, the way, the truth, and the light.

It was in the midst of this unforgettable feast of music that I took up my work in Glasgow's Toynbee House.

Naturally, I was as full of ideas as an egg is full of meat. What came out of those ideas makes up the story of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir.

Every story, like every picture, has a background. This preamble sketches in a bit of the *Orpheus* background, an important bit, and a picturesque bit too, since its focal point was Kelvingrove, the same Kelvingrove "where the rose in all her pride paints the hollow dingle side," and where, in the sunny splendour of 1901, there was such an unimaginable and stimulating wealth of great music-making.

III

GENESIS

A little hall in the basement of a tenement building in the Rottenrow of Glasgow in the year 1901. The choir seated there—the Toynbee House Musical Association. I, their new Conductor, on the platform. Some 40 or so present. Not all of them singers, not by any means; for the Club is a social one, the choir an adjunct. They look at me. I look at them. "What pieces do you know?" I say. They tell me. We start.

Those who fancy themselves as singers sing—sing very aggressively. Others feel their way. Others cheep. Some remain mute, like "the silver swan who, living, had no note." All look as if they are engaged on some superhuman task. Thus it was.

Was I disappointed? No! Did those skirling sopranos, those plugging contraltos, those throaty tenors, those scrawny basses depress me? No! I was a young man, making a start, and I did not mind starting well behind scratch. Youth is like that, and youth learns best by doing.

When the tumult died down I addressed my forces. I cannot recall what I said to them. Probably it was very little. This I know, that I was made to feel there and then that they and I had somehow been joined together for better or for worse, that we were setting out on a mission together, and that, no matter where I led, they would follow.

Going home that night I was accompanied by the Secretary, a highly intelligent little man, dark-skinned, eager, "Glasgow" to the finger-tips. He was very excited. "This is going to be a great choir," he kept repeating, as he puffed away at a wee cutty pipe. I asked him what he meant. He chuckled. "I te'l ye this is

going to be a great choir, maybe the best in Glasgow." I could not get a word in anywhere. "I know," he continued—"something happened there the night. I don't know what it was, but I've *never* seen them like that before, and I'm tellin' ye this—they'll do anything ye ask them, and they'll go a' the road wi' ye. Ye're laughin', but ye'll see I'm right—this is going to be a great choir."

I could discover no grounds for his elation. But that little man (Tom M'Dougall) saw farther than I did. He lived to prove it. He died long ago. I think he died in the full knowledge of what his unswerving faith meant to me at that time.

What a hive that basement room became! Night after night we were at it—how to read music, how to sing music, how to find expression through music, how to live music. By modulator and blackboard we worked, by example and precept, dreich uphill going, many falling by the way, others coming in to fill their places.

"Are you tenor or bass?" I remember asking one such. In an effeminate falsetto he replied—"I dinna ken, but my faither was a bass." Happy days when things are in the making.

As I write I have a picture of the scene in my mind—the girls, tight-laced, long-skirted, very prim, so prim indeed that if, in the front row, an ankle was showing—my word! Quickly the offending skirt would be adjusted. Changed days! No married women of course. In 1901 woman's place was in the home! Changed days indeed!

And the men—what a funny bunch, with their bowler hats and "'ole Bill" moustaches, their tight jackets, stiff starched collars and dickies, their big ties, their watch chains, and what not! Touchy too, to a degree.

One night, after much exhortation and patterning (and possibly a bit of temper), I at last got a particular phrase shaped as I wanted it. The singers were delighted. I

told them not to preen themselves, reminding them that dogs and cats and parrots and fleas and elephants could be taught to do things. At the close of the rehearsal a sulky-looking bass came forward. He spoke to me thus—"I just want to tell ye that I for one object to be ca'd an elephant, and that I'm leavin'!" From which it will be gathered that minds had to be trained as well as voices.

Gradually, personnel and outlook improved. One night a business-like man came in at the end of the rehearsal, offering his services as a bass. He was a cut above our average, and was a first-rate singer. It transpired later that, hearing of the choir, he had come to hear for himself, and had been listening from outside the door. He then decided to join us if we would have him. Quickly his influence was felt. Young societies are much given to contention, making mountains out of molehills. On one such occasion this newcomer interposed. "What are you all talking about?" he said—"don't you realise that you are members of a choir which is going to make history?" A bombshell! The malcontents pulled themselves together. The newcomer was cheered. Later he (J. B. Retson) became President. He, too, is dead, but his words and his example live on.