

INTRODUCTION

BY

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I have been asked, as President of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, to write an Introduction to this book, although my own personal association with the Choir did not come about till quite a few years later than the stirring events recorded in its pages.

It was about 1908 that a musical friend spoke to me rhapsodically about a choir which he had just heard for the first time—the Glasgow Orpheus. He pressed me to accompany him to its next concert. I agreed to go, and in due course went—but without any particularly pleasurable anticipation. My musical interests were “classical,” and mainly instrumental at that. My (self-imposed) limited experience of unaccompanied choral singing was that at the best it ranged from a disciplined drill-like slickness to a cloying sentimentality, with a seasoning of a facetious type of humour.

The Orpheus, I found to my surprise and delight, was something utterly different. Here were not merely the commonly accepted excellencies of good choral singing but, transcending these, sensitiveness, plasticity, the phrasing of a Lieder singer, colour, words which without projecting, obtruding, or calling attention to themselves were clear, shapely, significant, poetic, lovely to listen to, all the consonants there, the vowels all there and *matched*. Here in fact was the choral equivalent of the string quartet. I remember vividly to this day the effect on me of the singing of Elgar’s “My Love Dwelt in a Northern Land”—the billowing curving phrases,

the way in which the eerie, ghostly farawayness of the mood was caught and conveyed by the magic of words and tone colour, the over-riding sweeping arc—as of a skyline—that encompassed and unified the whole. So I became an Orpheus fan.

But it was a year or two later before I made the acquaintance of Hugh Robertson, when he called to convey an invitation to me to take on the job of Honorary Secretary of the first Glasgow Musical Competition Festival, which was to be held in the summer of 1911 as one of the features of the Glasgow International Exhibition of that year. My acceptance brought us closely together, with the ultimate result that in the autumn of 1912 I was invited to become President of the Orpheus Choir, an honour which I at once accepted.

So it comes about that, although never a singing member of the Choir, I have had the distinction of being President of the Glasgow Orpheus for the past thirty-four years, and as such have been allotted the task of writing this Introduction. And the Introduction must indubitably take the form of providing the answer to the question: By what miracle did the raw, vocally uncouth, assemblage of would-be singers of forty-five years ago become the world-famous choir of to-day?

For the Glasgow Orpheus Choir *is* world-famous. There must be few corners of the British Empire, or for that matter even furth of it, where in a company of two or three gathered together the mention of the Glasgow Orpheus will fail to wake responsive memories. In my own first-hand experience, in the U.S.A., in Canada, in European countries, any reference to Glasgow would as often as not be met with: "That's where the famous choir comes from, isn't it?"

In its own city the annual March and December concerts of the Choir each runs to four successive nights, and is given to audiences aggregating 12,000 people, and even at that quite fails to overtake the demand

for seats; its London concerts have become an "institution"; its visits are eagerly welcomed in every large city in England, Scotland, and Ireland; it has toured the United States and Canada, and just prior to the outbreak of war in 1939 was making preliminary arrangements for a Continental tour; its frequent broadcasts in the home and overseas programmes are keenly looked forward to and are listened to all over the world; it is under constant pressure not only to revisit the U.S.A. and Canada but to visit the other Dominions—Australia, New Zealand, South Africa; its conductor is the embarrassed recipient of a fan mail of "Hollywood star" volume.

All these things the Orpheus Choir owes to one thing and one thing only—the genius of its conductor. I use the word "genius" deliberately (there are plenty of *talented* choral conductors), and with an eye on the Oxford Dictionary definition of genius as "exalted intellectual power, instinctive and extraordinary imaginative, creative, or inventive capacity."

A great personality, Hugh Stevenson Roberton, of a kind typically Glasgow. Forceful, self-reliant, in the wider and best sense self-educated, poised, warm-hearted, humoursome, sociable, instinct with what the poet has called "the common touch." A man of many parts; in music—interpreter, teacher, adjudicator, critic, composer, as well as conductor; in letters—poet, dramatist, essayist, aphorist, lecturer, public speaker; in affairs—champion of the under-dog, opponent of all place and privilege, impatient of self-constituted "little brief authority"; in life—above all things, guide, philosopher, and friend to the starry aspirations of youth. But to the world at large—Roberton of the Orpheus.

The choral interpreter has a special problem, seldom realised. Like a Kreisler or a Paderewski, he must have a message to deliver, an instrument to convey it, a technique to express it. But a Kreisler faces his audience, Stradivarius in hand. A Paderewski seats

himself at the Erard piano provided for him. The would-be choral interpreter, however, has not only to be his own Kreisler, his own Paderewski; he has first to be his own Antonius Stradivarius, his own Sebastian Erard.

Before he can wake a single note of the music lying dormant within him he must first create his own instrument, find the raw material, select each element for its purpose, hammer, chisel, mould, weld, fit, assemble, finish. Then, before he can play upon the instrument of his own devising, he has a conducting technique to acquire. And only then does he stand ready to deliver his message.

When, forty-five years ago, the youthful and untried H. S. Robertson became conductor of the Toynbee House Choir, choirs as interpretative instruments modelled themselves on at best the military band. Robertson changed all that. Thanks alike to his precept and his example, choirs nowadays take as their exemplar—for subtlety, intimacy, spontaneity, plasticity, the string quartet; for tone colour and emotional range, the symphony orchestra.

In other circumstances, another environment, he might have achieved world celebrity as an orchestral conductor. But better, perhaps, that Providence led his feet into untried and untrodden ways. It is his achievement not merely to have fashioned a new type of choral instrument and evolved a new type of conducting technique for himself, but to have virtually destroyed the old and created an entirely new school of thought and practice in both. And in choral interpretation, which of course is the be-all and end-all of the perfecting of instrument and technique which precede it, his work has been similarly revolutionary. By fertilising the spirit of music with the spirit of poetry (which is, in fact, the essence of his achievement), he has caused an erstwhile wilderness of musical art to blossom as the rose.

These things then are the essence of Robertson of the Orpheus, his enduring monument. As the "onlie begetter" of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir he can say with pride and completeness: "This is the best of me. For the rest I ate, and drank, and slept like another."