

## MODERN WOMEN SONG-WRITERS.

By ESTHER PALLISER.



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(From photo by Walery, Regent Street.)

As the Editor has requested me to write on the above subject, I beg to say that it is one which interests me extremely, and yet I feel strongly my inability to properly cope with it. First I would say that during the past ten years women have been in music (as in other things) advancing so rapidly to the front, that the world no longer deems it necessary to compare their work unfavourably with that of the sterner sex, merely because it is woman's work. However, those censors of ours, the men, especially the critics (!) among them, are continually asserting that woman has no inventive capacity. Had these dear fellows been called upon to go through and select from the number of manuscripts that were sent to me from all sides shortly after the public announcement of my recent vocal recital, they might probably have changed their tune, or else have come to the conclusion that there had been a large amount of plagiarism and general thieving going on among the weaker sex. There are several of our women writers of to-day whose work is undoubtedly strong, bold and original. Perhaps it will even be found that there are more *original* songs by women than by men. I have heard this said on more than one occasion by people who are in a position to know all about it.

One of the most interesting traits in women writers to my thinking is that they are so careful in their choice of words. And then the audacious way in which they treat the words; how they catch the poetic subtle meaning and depict it in the music. At least this has been my experience during the past few months, and I have studied a goodly number of songs in different languages in that time, with a view to selecting just the most luscious morsels for a particular purpose. Of course I am alluding only to the higher grade of composers, as life is really too short to waste time over songs that do not give one the feeling that the writer has at least aimed at reaching the highest pinnacle in her art.

In naming a few of our cleverest women composers of modern times, let us begin with Augusta Holmes, who is perhaps the oldest and entitled to first place. Half French and half Irish, she is a woman noted for her warmth and force of character. Her music shows her to be such, for it is as manlike and masterful as anyone could wish, and from the very beginning of her career she has been accounted a man in her art. Well-known, especially in France, for her songs, she has lately composed a grand opera, libretto, as well as music, which was produced at the Grand Opera House in Paris. This being the first opera by a woman to obtain success, a mighty commotion has been made, and justly so.

A little bird says that our best-known lady writer in England is also finishing one which will be announced very shortly. But this is a digression as well as a secret, and I must not say any more about it.

Surely everybody in three great countries knows and loves Mademoiselle Chaminade's songs. Their wealth of melody, daintiness, piquancy and quaintness of harmonic changes, have been written about by far more learned people than I, so I can do nothing but reiterate their phrases. To the artist her songs always appeal, and good English translations are heard in every concert-room here, and are universally successful. Her music always seems to be bubbling over with joyousness, purity and truth.

Truth to the sentiment of the words is what I particularly mean.

Of our serious English women, doubtless Maude Valérie White and Ethel Smyth are at the head, although the latter has written fewer songs, preferring large choral and orchestral works and oratorios. There is no doubt though but that she could do plenty of songs did she so choose—she has the gift. This is proven by a charming little song written when she was only fifteen years of age, and called "Schön Rohtrant."

Maude Valérie White is so popular and her songs so widely known, that there seems to be nothing new I can add relating to her. She writes principally to English text, although one sometimes sees her name affixed to French and German songs as well. Her music seems to have a distinctive suavity that always enables one to tell a song is hers.

Frances Allitsen is one of my favourite song-writers of both sexes, and I think the reason is that she has a way of reaching the dramatic side of things, of striking a deeper note than most, so to speak. Her words are delightfully chosen, and the idea carried out so admirably in the music, that her songs are frequently perfect pictures in their way, and must impress an audience so, it seems to me. In a word, her music leads one to believe that there is a brilliant future for her, should she decide to treat large dramatic subjects, as well as the daintier *morceaux* she now does to such perfection. She has been well-named the Chaminade of England.

Guy d'Hardelot and Elvira Gambogi, one half French, the other more than half Italian, write charming melodies, with great refinement and taste. The former's best work is, unfortunately, published in France, and but little known in this country. They both seem to me to be endowed with melodic gifts.

I must not forget to mention Dorothea Hollins as one of our very serious English song-writers. She excels in German *Lieder*,

and, being a fine linguist as well as poetess, is able to provide charming translations of her own songs, a boon to singers and public; for a faulty translation will often mar (for those who do not care for it in the original) the effect of an otherwise delightful composition.

Marie Wurm is another English lady who goes in for this same class of thing, and does it to perfection, although she is capable of composing on a much grander scale, and has received the Mendelssohn Scholarship four times, a great feat indeed, considering the competition there always is.

Liza Lehmann is another whose charming songs abound in refined and delicate touches.

Of the babies among my song-writers, I must mention Ella Overbeck and Sybil Palliser. The former is a curiously-interesting little Norwegian girl, who has a unique talent, and makes use of it in unique fashion. There is a boldness, a carelessness, sometimes an almost Eastern flavouring running through her songs—melodies and harmonies—that seem to me to be quite unlike any other woman I know of. Certainly she is novel, her setting of Kingsley's "Slave Girl's Song" proves that.

Sybil Palliser is a clever pianist and thorough musician. She is charmingly timid. Her songs show not only quaintness and originality, but an underlying strength and power, that presage well for the future. The song which has made her greatest success is daintiness personified. These two song-writers are both so young yet, that we can only hope they will go on as well as they have begun, and there is naught to fear.

Last but not least we come to speak of American women song-writers. As far as my knowledge goes, Margaret Ruthven Lang stands at the head, and ranks high in her musicianly qualities. Helen Hood is another who is well-known. But as America is so young in all things pertaining to art, so behind European countries, perhaps one should not judge her from the same standpoint. At any rate, American women being freer and broader than the women of Europe, it is to be expected that when the country does wake up to her own latent possibilities in music, or rather when she has sufficiently developed her faculties, the women will come to the fore as song-writers even more brilliantly than their sisters in Europe have done. I have heard it said, that not until a great love of their own country has taken root in the hearts of a people does that country formulate a distinctive art-atmosphere of its own. At present the artistic women of the country seem to be cosmopolitan in their tastes, and that is as it should be until they have absorbed out of all other countries whatever material they need to the more thoroughly express their own talents.

To those people who tauntingly remark that women never have been great composers and that it is not to be expected of them for centuries to come, we can only reply that up to the present decade there were no women song-writers even, to rank anywhere nearly so high as a half-dozen do to-day, and it is best to wait and see what time shall bring forth in the production of more extended works. At any rate it has been proven that an entire afternoon's enjoyment can be furnished without drawing on men's compositions at all, and this with manifest delight to a large audience and without monotony of subjects or treatment.

The modern women song-writers whom I have mentioned in this article are only those who have come under my especial notice, with whose songs I am personally acquainted. There are doubtless many others budding forth, who will make their presence felt soon. Let us hope that it be so!