

MOMENTS WITH MODERN MUSICIANS:

A CHAT WITH DR. HANS RICHTER.

BY F. KLICKMANN.



"*O*H, please do not ask me my views on Beethoven. I am so afraid you will," said Dr. Hans Richter to me in a tone of beseechment one afternoon this summer. "It is a most interesting topic, of course, but sometimes—one gets just a little tired of it."

"Then Beethoven shall be ignored. It is yourself I want to discuss, not the great composer."

Our environment on this occasion suggested but little that was musical, a grand piano being the only feature that in any way appealed to the artistic sense, if one excepts a large bowl of mignonette and heliotrope that stood on the table. For the rest, the room was one of those typical drawing-rooms that can be secured during the London season in the fashionable quarter of the town.

Yet the personality of the man soon worked a transformation, and instead of gazing over an orthodox London window-box, full of geraniums and daisies, into a London street teeming with hansom cabs like recurring decimals, one was speedily transferred to Vienna, with its unending opera season and its superb concerts; or to Bayreuth, where the faithful worship unmolested at the shrine of the "Master"; and yet again would the scene change, and Brussels, Paris, Lucerne or Munich would supply a moment's halting place in that most circuitous journey which we took across and about Europe—and all in the space of an hour.

To describe the famous conductor is scarcely necessary. One has seen him so often, perhaps strolling leisurely down Regent Street regarding the whole world with an air of complacency, or better still, standing before his able bodyguard, the gentlemen of the orchestra, at those magnificent concerts at St. James's Hall that are always associated with his name.

The Richter Concerts were started in 1879. The first season consisted of only three concerts, and public opinion hung in

the balance as to the merits of numbers one and two, but the third concert won everyone over to the side of the new venture, and since that date the "Richters" are one of the most important features of the London season. On these evenings the audience consists of something more than the ordinary concert goer, and visitors to London have often enjoyed singling out from the gay crowd in the stalls such musicians as August Manns, Dr. Hubert Parry, Edward Lloyd, Georg Henschel, Miss Fanny Davies, Madame Antoinette Sterling, and many other well-known faces. The late Lord Leighton was one of the most regular attendants at these concerts, and the late Lord Tennyson was at one time another familiar figure. Mr. Balfour and Mr. John Morley, sitting side by side, are by no means the only politicians who snatch an hour or two from political cares to enjoy some of the finest performances of Beethoven and Wagner that are to be heard through the length and breadth of our small island.

Dr. Richter's whole life has been passed in a musical atmosphere, and it was pleasant to get him to speak of his early years.

"Both my parents were very musical," he said. "My father was the Kapellmeister at the cathedral in Raab, my native city, and my mother was a fine singer. After my father's death in 1854—that was when I was eleven—I went into the Imperial Chapel at Vienna as a—what do you say in English?—a sing-boy."

"We call them choristers."

"Ah, yes, that is the word. While I was singing in the chapel I was being educated at the Gymnasium—that is a large public school. I also worked hard at my music, and as time went on I played in various orchestras in Vienna—a different instrument in each. My wish always was to become a conductor, and to this end I was anxious to make myself practically acquainted with every instrument in the orchestra."

In this he has certainly succeeded, for not only can Dr. Richter play every orchestral instrument, but he is one of the finest performers anywhere on wind instruments.

"When did you first meet Wagner?" I asked.

"In 1866. It happened in this way. Wagner wanted someone to come to Lucerne, where he was then living, to correct the proofs and make a fair copy of the score of 'Die Meistersinger.' He wrote to Vienna, and after a stiff examination at the hands of Esser and Lachner, they decided to send me."

"Had you ever seen Wagner at that time?"

"Yes, I had seen him conducting, and had worshipped him at a distance, you know; but I had never spoken to him, though I had always longed to do so."

"Were you disillusionised when you went to stay with him?"

"Not at all. I was just fascinated with him. He was a wonderful man. I cannot understand anyone meeting him and not being impressed by him."

"Yet his enemies say he was irritable."

"They did their best to make him so," replied the Doctor, with just a shade of fierceness on his usually placid face. "How could a man write such music as he wrote without being highly strung and more than sensitive? And how could a man with such nerves find the world anything but jarring at times? I tell you he was a most lovable man, no matter what people may say."

"You did not remain long at Lucerne?"

"No, when 'Die Meistersinger' was finished I went to Munich to prepare a performance of it in that town. By the way, did you know that I have sung in opera? It was at the sixth performance that was ever given of 'Die Meistersinger.' I was not announced beforehand. But at the last moment the vocalist who was to have taken Kothner's part was ill, so to save the performance I sang in his place. I did not set the house on fire," said the musician, laughing to himself at the remembrance of it, "but I did not upset them. That was the main thing."

"Was that your first appearance on the operatic stage?"

"My first and my last—you may call it my solo appearance."

"Having had such practical experience in the matter, will you tell me whether you consider Wagner's music detrimental to the voice?"

"Certainly not. It is not more trying to sing than Mozart. Of course it is difficult music, and it takes a musician to render it as it should be sung, but it is all nonsense to imagine that it is unsingable. C is C whether Wagner or Mozart use it."

Speaking of the difficulty of Wagner's music naturally led us to talk of singers, and Dr. Richter emphatically pronounced in favour of English vocalists.

"You have some remarkably fine singers in England," he said. "They produce their voices as a rule more naturally than do Germans, who are inclined to force the tone. Look at Edward Lloyd; what could you desire better than his voice? I was so sorry he did not sing when he was in Vienna. He would have made an immense impression there. English singers are much appreciated on the Continent, and their popularity will increase as time goes on. Madame Albani and Ben Davies, for instance, are great favourites."

"Do English composers obtain much of a hearing out of their own country?"

"Decidedly yes. I often give their works in Vienna. Cowen's music is always well received. I introduced his Scandinavian Symphony on the Continent, and other composers—Mackenzie, for example—are often in our programmes. I believe that in the future English musicians will occupy a prominent position on the Continent. You have no lack of good men here, and your audiences are splendid. I reckon my English audiences the most enthusiastic I ever have. They are quite my friends. I brought some members of my Vienna orchestra over here to the Birmingham Festival, and they were simply astounded at the enthusiasm of the people. We do not have that in Germany or Austria."

"But you have more music than we do?"

"That is true. In Vienna we have opera every night all the year round, to say nothing of the large number of concerts. Sunday is always a very hard day with me. There is high mass in the cathedral at eleven, a concert at half-past twelve, and a grand opera at half-past eight. If one has to conduct all three performances it is very tiring."

"Do you ever take a holiday?" something prompted me to inquire.

"Not very often. When I am away from Vienna I am still at work. Last night I conducted a concert in Brussels; I have now come to London for my concerts here, and when these are over I shall go straight to Bayreuth to rehearse the performances there. I am hoping that Madame Wagner will set me free by August, then I can take three weeks' rest before beginning the work for the autumn. I am very fond of work," the Doctor added, "and conducting is especially

congenial to me. But sometimes I get overdone, and feel I should like a really long holiday."

I was not surprised to hear this; a more ardent worker does not exist among the conductors of Europe. And Dr. Richter's life has always been one long round of doing. He conducted the first performance of "Lohengrin" in French, and assisted Wagner in bringing out "Die Meistersinger," "Siegfried," "Rheingold," and "Götterdämmerung." In Budapest he practically made the music, and certainly Vienna owes him a large debt of gratitude for the work he has done there. He is also Madame Wagner's right hand in preparing the festival performances at Bayreuth.

The history of the ever-popular orchestral work, Wagner's Siegfried Idyl, is well known, but it gained a new interest when the Doctor told it in his own way.

"In 1871 Wagner composed the Idyl as a surprise for Madame Wagner's birthday, which was on Christmas Day. I rehearsed it in Lucerne, keeping the matter a profound secret. On her birthday morning the musicians who were to perform it came over, some from Zurich and some from

Lucerne, to the house at Tribschen, on the borders of Lake Lucerne, where Wagner and his family were then living. We stood on the steps in front of the house and performed it. Wagner conducted, and I played the trumpet. The children were as delighted as Madame Wagner, and they always spoke of it as the 'Treppen music' (stair-music), though it was actually named after Wagner's son, and the drama of the same name."

If Wagner appreciated the labours of his colleague Hans Richter, he in turn can never speak too highly of Mr. Theodor Frantzen, his aide-de-camp, who trains the Richter Choir. Some of the pleasantest events in connection with Dr. Richter's visits to London are the occasions on which he attends and personally conducts these rehearsals. Unlike the other large London choirs, the services of the Richter

Choir are required so seldom that they soon get out of working order, and need a superhuman amount of energy to pull them together again. This energy Mr. Frantzen possesses to a surprising degree. For weeks before the arrival of the great Hungarian conductor Mr. Frantzen is drilling his forces in the dingy hall in Store Street, where, with a persistency that becomes almost aggravat-



From a photo by

[Elliott & Fry.

MADAME RICHTER.

MR. THEODOR FRANTZEN.
DR. RICHTER.

ing at times, he has a passage sung again, again, again, and yet once more, till there is not a fault left. Mr. Frantzen's office as choir-trainer is no sinecure; yet he displays marked patience, especially when he is preparing such music as the Graal scene from "Parsifal," where the chorus is divided into five soprano, two alto, two tenor and two bass parts, each of which seems to be gifted with a distinct determination to go wrong.

But at length the work is pulled into shape. It is announced that the Doctor will attend the next rehearsal. That night every member turns up in good time; the visitors' gallery is packed; a feeling of unrest pervades the hall, though the rehearsal begins as usual, and Mr. Frantzen goes over again and again, in his favourite manner, any passages that show a tendency to unsteadiness. Presently the fortunate row of basses who are nearest the door catch a glimpse of the long looked-for figure coming down the corridor, and like electricity the news flies. It matters not what they may be singing, down go the books, and before the musician is barely in the hall applause is at its wildest. Hans Richter makes his way to the platform with many bows and the happiest of smiles. The greeting of the two conductors is hearty. On the Doctor's part one can see the most cordial friendship for his assistant, while on Mr. Frantzen's side there is unbounded loyalty and admiration for his chief. The meeting of these tried warriors is always a pleasant study. The same may be said for the Doctor's dress. On such occasions he is usually attired *à l'anglaise*, but with a difference. A pale gray alpaca suit, a white waistcoat adorned with a red check and large red buttons, collar and cuffs of blue linen, and a light straw sailor hat, these are the colours most affected by the Doctor.

After a little speech to the choir in his

inimitable foreign-English he takes the *bâton* in hand. I need hardly say that he never once refers to the score; his prodigious memory has for years been a thing of wonder. He conducts very easily, more as though he were idly toying with his weapon, than directing and controlling a large body of human beings. He sings a great deal himself, and looks the essence of geniality—till he hears a false note. Then down comes the *bâton* with a smart crack, his left hand is raised, and everything is instantaneously at a standstill. His careless appearance is most misleading to those who do not know him. Nothing ever escapes either the eyes or the ears of Hans Richter.

His directions to the choir are always concise and clearly understandable, though often he gives them in an original manner. One of his very effective methods of obtaining a sudden *diminuendo* is to hold up his hand and exclaim, in a ghostly tone, "Wanish!" and immediately the sound does vanish.

A text he continually preaches upon is what he calls "entoosum." Over and over again I have heard him remark that we do not need more music but more enthusiasm; that, however, one soon gets if one has much to do with him; his own is most infectious.

"I like English people very much," the Doctor said to me at parting; "they are so kind and appreciative. It is always good to come here."

I think we in turn can heartily assure him that we are more than glad to welcome him. It will make a sad blank in the artistic world of England when Hans Richter decides to visit us no more; but we hope that is a very far distant event, for not only should we be sorry to miss the music he brings with him, but an equal regret would it be to lose the pleasant glimpses of the courteous kind-hearted man who has made firm friends wherever he goes in this a foreign land.



