

AN ORGANIST AND HIS ART:

SIR FREDERICK BRIDGE AT
WESTMINSTER ABBEY.

BY F. KLIICKMANN



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[Valentine & Sms, Dundee.

THE most popular of London musicians is undoubtedly Sir Frederick Bridge.

He has attained this distinction through the sheer force of his personality, for there never was a man less given to self-advertisement, or more callously and persistently deaf to the importunities of editors, interviewers, and the whole army of Society paragraphists. Not that he is unapproachable under ordinary circumstances—quite the reverse; he is one of the kindest hearted of men in a profession where petty jealousies and magnanimous generousities jostle one another in a curious manner. Sir Frederick's tendency to help "lame dogs over stiles" whenever he meets them must add considerably to the wear and tear of his life's work, I fancy.

A man has to pay a certain penalty when he is gifted with a perfect genius for winning the admiration of the public; and Sir Frederick Bridge must realise this when he attacks his daily budget of letters. The position he occupies in the musical world brings him into touch with an immense audience, inasmuch as he holds not merely one important post, but many. As the organist of Westminster Abbey his name is

familiar, not only to Londoners, but to the whole of the civilised world; our Abbey, with its grand musical service and its organ that stands without a rival anywhere, is a centre towards which all tourists gravitate at least once in their lifetime. It is the very first place into which our American cousins precipitate themselves, after landing in breathless haste and taking some hurried refreshment on our foggy shores; and one of the most haunting memories that Colonials carry with them to the great plains and mountains "out beyond" is the recollection of that grey old pile, where organ and choir intermingle their voices and make one vast sea of sound.

It often happens that visitors who have travelled some tens of thousands of miles—more or less—to see the Abbey and hear the music, are anything but satisfied with the indistinct silhouette, above the choir-screen, that is pointed out to them as no less important a personage than the famous organist himself. True, those with extra long sight will sometimes aver that the figure wears glasses (though such a statement always inclines one to suspect a previous acquaintance with Sir Frederick's photographs!);

but, apart from this, one can actually see very little of the musician himself, beyond a misty halo (according to the position of the sun), which one admits is a very appropriate background under the circumstances.

English people are, as a rule, quite willing to accept the halo and go on their way rejoicing, but not so our transatlantic relatives.

"Now, I just guess I haven't come three thousand miles (and three thousand back, that'll make six thousand) to see this dear Abbey and the lovely graves of Longfellow, and Tennyson, and Handel, and the rest, and hear all those 'cute little boys sing, without getting a bigger sight of Sir Bridge than that little speck up there. Why, he might just as well be McKinley for all I can tell!"

Thus spake a delightful Boston girl, who was kindly showing me around my own native city! I explained that "Sir Bridge" and the President of the United States bore not the very slightest outward resemblance to one another, though I had

found them to be marvellously alike in the matter of strong personality and unflinching courtesy, and in order to prove my statement I was unwise enough to lead her in the direction of a certain door marked "Private, no admittance," in one of the byways of the Abbey, which I knew led to the organ-loft. Evidently many other persons knew this, too; quite a small crowd of people were waiting about expectantly. I kept Miss Bostonia

well in the background, knowing the irrepressibility of her temperament. Presently the door opened, and a sedate young man emerged, with an absorbed, thoughtful air and a large roll of music. The small gathering looked admiringly upon him, fell back to make way for him, and then followed, eagerly, but at a respectful distance. "There he is," said my companion excitedly, preparing to make a headlong rush for him.

He was a pleasing looking youth, and possibly might not have been averse to being shaken hands with on behalf of all the maidens in Massachusetts. But I detained her—much against her will, I admit. It was useless for me to explain that that was *not* "Sir Bridge"; she merely retorted, "Then, if he isn't, why are all the people following him?" Which was an unanswerable piece of logical deduction, and I didn't care to betray the secrets of my country so far as to explain to her that I entertained certain suspicions that the affair was nothing

more than a little ruse. When the crowd had been thus decoyed away, the door again opened, and a tall figure appeared, carrying a square cap and peering slightly to right and left through his glasses. Then he made his way towards the cloisters, unconscious of the two figures loitering in the shadows. I let him get well out of reach before I said, "That was Sir Frederick." With wide-opened eyes she exclaimed, "You



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SIR FREDERICK BRIDGE, MUS. DOC.

don't say!" and then added, after an interval of silence, during which she had evidently grasped and digested the situation, "Well, and if that isn't just too cunning for anything!"

But though Sir Frederick Bridge does his best to evade the pronounced attentions of the celebrity-hunter, he will put himself to actual trouble if he can be of real assistance to anyone. I can spare space to recall only one such incident, but this was very characteristic of the man himself. It was in the old days of the Gresham Musical Lectures, when they were held at Gresham College, in Basinghall Street, and not, as they are now, in the roomy great hall of the City of London School. Two enthusiastic musical students had hurried to the lecture at a pace that argued more zeal than discretion. The hall was packed, although there was still half an hour to spare. Yet they managed to edge a way in somehow; and then it was that the airlessness of the room, combined, perhaps, with the previous scamper across the City, resulted in a prosaic "faint"! The invalid was assisted downstairs again into a cooler atmosphere, the only seat visible being a large carved arm-chair in the entrance-hall, evidently sacred to the use of an imposing-looking, gold-laced individual who stood beside it, representative of civic dignity and authority. The circumstances being briefly explained, he graciously gave consent for the chair to be utilised. At that moment a door opened and Sir Frederick (then Dr.) Bridge crossed the vestibule. "Mr. Bumble" saluted obsequiously, and as the Doctor turned to acknowledge it he caught sight of the forlorn couple, who were entire strangers to him. He stepped over to them and said, "Have you come to the lecture? or are you waiting for somebody? or—"

"The lady hain't feeling well, sir," interposed the magnificent official, jerking his cocked hat in the direction of the chair. "Eat of the room," he added by way of a lucid and exhaustive explanation.

"Then why in the world, man, didn't you get some water?" And in a moment the Doctor had returned with a liberal supply. Having been thus restored, that student desired—with the energy that only belongs to one's youth, alas!—to risk once more the carbonic acid gas in order to hear the lecture. But the audience by this time extended down the staircase in a most hopeless manner. Dr. Bridge called an attendant, however, and told him to take the two up a

private staircase, and give them seats in the front row, reserved for the City Fathers, remarking, "Put them under an open window and in a strong draught!" Then turning to them he said, "And if either of you contemplate another faint this evening, *please* do not do so in the middle of one of my best speeches. I will make a convenient pause if I observe that you are getting pale. And when you are suffering from a stiff neck all next week, I hope you will think kindly of me!"

I ought to add, however, for the benefit of those who propose to attend future Gresham Lectures, that there is ample ventilation in the City of London School, also a handy supply of water outside, while the hall-porters now relieve Sir Frederick of the task of administration.

The Gresham Lectures on Music bring Professor Bridge into touch with a very different audience to the one he is accustomed to at the Abbey. At Westminster it is the leisured sightseer who listens to him daily, whereas his lectures are crowded with students and busy City men. The great secret of his success lies in his happy sense of humour and his overwhelming enthusiasms. Whatever subject he has in hand, for the time being he clothes it with an importance that at once communicates itself to his audience.

The first time I heard of the now long past Purcell Commemoration remains vividly in my mind. It was a wretched, cold winter day. The Abbey looked lonely and mysterious in the fog, and all the bare trees in Dean's Yard were glistening in a coating of hoar-frost. I shivered as I walked along the cloisters to that portion of the Abbey known as Littleton Tower, where Sir Frederick resides. But the glow from the big fire in the study gave a more optimistic colour to life. One forgot all about the cold, looking out of the picturesque square window on to the still more picturesque gables and quaint corners outside, and thinking how delightful it must be to live in an abbey, and in Westminster Abbey above all others. That study, by the way, has an unusually musical history. It was at one time occupied by the late Sir Joseph Barnby (whom Sir Frederick Bridge also succeeded as conductor of the Royal Choral Society), and the tiles round the fireplace bear the initials J. B., which likewise serve for the present tenant, Sir Frederick's first name being John.

On the morning in question Sir Frederick Bridge was even more cheery than usual.



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VIEW OF THE ORGAN-LOFT AND CHOIR-SCREEN FROM THE EAST END.

[T. J. Wright.

“Now I am going to show you a real treasure,” he said excitedly, after we had been talking for a while.

“Oh!” laughed Lady Bridge, “I know what it is, and I have heard it before, so I shall go!”

But the Doctor persisted that it did not matter *how* many times she had heard it before, it would certainly bear hearing again.

He then produced an old, faded, yellow, worn book of manuscript music, and tenderly opened it.

“What is it?” I asked.

“What is it? Why, it is the original MS. of the Purcell *Te Deum* that there has been so much controversy about; and here are all the corrections and annotations in *Purcell's own handwriting.*”

It was a most interesting relic. Everything was so clearly legible. The whole work was in Purcell's writing, and he had even written the names of the soloists who were to sing certain solos—names as long since dead as the hand that wrote them.

The MS. had come into the Doctor's possession quite by accident. A man whom he

down hurriedly on the first scrap of paper he came across, meaning to deal with it later on. The words were written against the music.

"You see, I got two things for my money," said Sir Frederick, as he sat down to the piano, and played and sang the quaint little song.

As I have already stated, Sir Frederick's sense of humour is by no means the least of

his saving graces. His conversation is often a running fire of witty *mots* and smart repartee. The very smallest event will serve him. Not long ago the following notice was fastened up in the Music Room at Westminster Abbey.

The Great and Swell occupants of the Organ Loft invite the Choir, if they can descend Solo(w), to a friendly Manual and Pedal Exercise, entitled Cricket. Every Player is requested to provide a Full Score, and it is hoped many runs will be executed, though no "great shakes" are expected. All particulars to be settled at the rehearsal on Tuesday next at a quarter to Eleven.

P.S.—A Ball-Proof Cuirass will be provided, and a doctor will attend.

This brilliant musician can use his pen very effectively when he pleases, as his clever parody on "Sally in our Alley" bears witness, in which he sings the praises of his friend, Mr. Labouchere, M.P. and editor of *Truth*,

and one of the several distinguished personages who reside within the Abbey precincts.

"LABBY IN OUR ABBEY."

Of all the boys that are so smart
There's none like crafty Labby:
He learns the secret of each heart,
And lives near our Abbey.
There is no lawyer in the land
That's half as sharp as Labby;
He is a demon in the art,
And guileless as a baby!



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A NEARER VIEW OF THE ORGAN, SHOWING A PORTION OF THE NEW CASE, ERECTED TO COMMEMORATE THE PURCELL BI-CENTENARY.

did not know, brought it to him one day, and asked him if he cared to make an offer for it.

"After I had examined it, and saw what it really was, I told him that either his bones or the MS. would remain behind in the Abbey," said the Doctor, "and he preferred the latter."

There was also a little song, just roughly scribbled on a spare blank leaf, the last in the book. Evidently Purcell had jotted it

For "Bomba Balfour" in the week
 There seems to be no worse day
 Than is the one that comes between
 A Tuesday and a Thursday.
 For then we read each foul misdeed,
 "Unmanly, mean and shabby,"
 Exposed to view in type so true
 By penetrating Labby.

The ministers and members all
 Make game of truthful Labby,
 Though but for him 'tis said they'd be
 A sleepy set and flabby.
 And when their seven long years are out
 They hope to bury Labby;
 Ah! then how peacefully he'll lie,
 But not in our Abbey!

As an after-dinner speaker Sir Frederick Bridge is always an acquisition. The following is a fair specimen of the short, bright speeches for which he is celebrated. It was made at a banquet given to Mr. W. H. Cummings, the Principal of the Guildhall School of Music, and was a response to the toast of "The Ladies":—

"It is really too bad to call upon me to acknowledge this toast, more



SIR FREDERICK BRIDGE IN HIS DOCTOR'S ROBES.



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CONDUCTING AT THE QUEEN'S JUBILEE SERVICE.

especially as I was just beginning to enjoy myself. It is, of course, a great satisfaction and pleasure to me to be present here, for our guest was connected with the Abbey. In my young days, before most of you were born—at all events, before any of the ladies present were born—it was the custom to call upon the most bashful, the best looking, and most shy young man to return thanks for the ladies. No violation of this rule has been permitted to-night. As the honorary secretary himself put it on these grounds, of course I could not refuse to reply. The new woman is to be paramount. Musically, we poor men are to be done away with. I hope they will be as kind to us as we are to them. Of course, I am not speaking from experience. Kindness to them! Why, just think what happens at examinations when there are lady and gentleman candidates. I have seen an unfortunate youth come to play the violin for a diploma, and, entering the room, he proceeds to tune his instrument. 'Can't stop

here all day whilst you are tuning,' says an examiner. The lad goes away, and then advances a lady, bringing her violin *in the case!* And it has not been tuned! What occurs? One of the examiners jumps up and undoes the case; another catches up the instrument and tunes it, or tries to. A string breaks! But she is not sent out to fetch the next person. You hear one German examiner say, '*Sehr schön!*' She passes with honours! The unfortunate youth manages only to *scrape* through. In the ladies we all have kind supporters. Some have admirers. Some have wives whom they dare not bring to such a festive gathering. Some have wives like Mr. Cummings." ("I have only *one!*" interpolated that gentleman.) "In the name of that one wife of his, whom I congratulate upon the honour done to her husband, I beg to thank you for the way you have drunk this toast."

As conductor of the Royal Choral Society's Concerts at Albert Hall, Sir Frederick Bridge has proved himself to be a man worthy to succeed that king among choral conductors who laboured so faithfully and so long to bring the choir to as near a state of perfection as possible. With the Choral Society, as with his Abbey choir, Sir Frederick is immensely popular. His rehearsals are never dull, yet he allows not the

smallest fault to go uncorrected. Of the results he obtains I need not speak. All the world and his wife and daughters attend the Albert Hall Concerts with such regularity that any description of these would be a superfluity.

Sir Frederick Bridge has had many odd experiences, but perhaps the funniest of all was when he discovered a small, suspicious-looking black bag in the organ-loft, while turning over the music just before the Jubilee Thanksgiving Service at the Abbey in 1887. On opening it gingerly and discovering a loudly ticking clock within, his horror was increased a hundredfold, for it was at a time when dynamiters were performing many freakish things around London, and preparing all sorts of little surprises for people in general and royalties in particular. Of course the supposed "infernal machine" was escorted off the premises with as much promptitude and despatch as the trembling officials could command. It would have been a most heroic and exciting affair, of course, had it not proved to be a small, harmless American clock, that was merely striving to do its duty in that station of life, etc. It belonged to one of the bandsmen, who had bought it on his way to the rehearsal and then had inadvertently left his bag behind him.

A SONG OF THE DAWN.

BY MRS. COMYNS CARR.

SOFT, in the dawn, came Love to me—
 Love, that is born of the sun—
 Love that is bred in the lap of the sea
 When the Night and the Day are one.



He came on the crest of the morning cloud,
 He sprang through the morning mist,
 And laughed as he leapt from his downy shroud
 Where the Sun and the Ocean kissed.



He struck at my heart with his spear of flame—
 The Sun set the world ablaze—
 And I knew 'twas for me Love laughed as he came
 And was born of the Sun's sweet rays.