

The Cornell Music Festival

Back in the "gay nineties", thirty-one years ago this coming May, Charles H. Adams, graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, launched at Mount Vernon, Iowa, an enterprise the results of which have doubtless far exceeded his ambitions and dreams. The May Music Festival, thus established, represented the faith and vision which always characterize pioneers. Music was not then the influence in the life of the American people that it is to-day. Neither phonograph nor radio had as yet made their way into the home. You could not then on a Sunday afternoon press a button, turn a dial in an unimpressive cabinet, and hear the words, "The Standard Oil Company of Indiana takes pleasure in presenting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra". Not only was such a thing then impossible, but few would have dreamed that it ever could be possible. Hearing music in 1899 demanded more initiative. If you lived in a neighboring town, you could not count on your automobile to bring you home over a paved road; but might have to prove your devotion to the arts by sitting up half the night in a train or railroad station.

Remembering all these things, one can realize that it took a stout heart to plan a Festival of even three concerts in a village of fifteen hundred inhabitants

and a college of a third that many students. To be sure, only the soloists were imported. There was no orchestra; and the main feature was the newly organized Oratorio Society, singing Goring Thomas's "The Swan and the Skylark". The venture was bold, but its popularity was conclusive. The next year, 1900, the three concerts were increased to five. An assembled orchestra of twenty pieces arrived on the last night from Chicago to accompany a full evening's performance of "The Messiah". In 1901 another step forward brought what was then known as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a touring organization headed by Adolph Rosenbecker, but not to be confused with the great orchestra which more recently acquired the legal right to the name. With this year, symphonic music, even the "Unfinished Symphony", found its way into the programs. In 1902 the short-lived, but attractive, Spiering Orchestra was the feature. Then, in 1903, the Festival acquired real prestige with the arrival of the Theodore Thomas Orchestra.

Instead of its distinguished founder, the young assistant conductor of the orchestra, Frederick A. Stock, made the trip. According to authentic tradition, it was the first occasion on which he had conducted the orchestra outside of Chicago; and this fact has sometimes been used to explain his indisputable fondness for Mount Vernon, and his warm loyalty in the face of tempting offers to play concerts elsewhere in this territory. The 1903 visit of

the orchestra began an unbroken chain of performances which is now virtually a fixed engagement — the only one west of Chicago. Twenty-six years have seen the disappearance of many a familiar face. Faithful attendants upon the concerts recognize a mere handful of the original orchestra. But with every year, old ties are strengthened, and new ones are formed. As for Mr. Stock himself, he is the most loved of all Festival traditions. The cheer that breaks out each year from a rising audience at his appearance is no mere gesture. His response is an intimacy of manner and speech which amazes Chicagoans, accustomed to the chill correctness of Orchestra Hall. On a Saturday night he teases the audience, conducts guessing contests, leads community singing. The experience is one never to be forgotten, a unique tradition.

As regards musical content, the Festival early arrived at a plan which has since been seldom disturbed. Following recitals on Thursday night and Friday afternoon, the audience first sees the orchestra on Friday evening. This concert, often the high point of the Festival, has presented, usually, one solo by a great artist such as, let us say, Witherpoon, Bispham, or Amato. Often, it has been nearly or wholly Wagnerian.

Saturday afternoon is termed the "Symphony Concert", and is in every respect the counterpart of such a program in Chicago or Boston. In the course of the years, there have been performed no less than

twenty complete symphonies, several of them more than once. In this number have been included modern as well as classic pieces — a deserved tribute to the musical maturity of the audiences.

Saturday evening, now divided with the orchestra, was once the exclusive possession of the Oratorio Society. This choral organization is the contribution of the local community to the success of the programs. Never numbering fewer than a hundred voices, and drilled faithfully for months, it maintains a high standard despite constant changes in personnel and direction.

The list of soloists who have appeared at Cornell Festivals is far too long for inclusion here. Personal fame in the field of musical performance is short-lived, and some names which once created a thrill might require a biographical sketch to-day. With apologies, however, to the long list omitted, we may mention:

Sopranos, Rider-Kelsey, Perceval Allen, Hinkle, Rappold, Garrison, Gluck, Hempel, Lashanska, Stanley, Sundelius, Dux, Austral.

Contraltos, Spencer, Keyes, Schumann-Heink, Alcock, Braslau.

Tenors, Hall, Hamlin, Johnson, Beddoe, Miller, Murphy, Aresoni, Althouse.

Baritones, Heinrich, Campanari, Bispham, Witherspoon (at least five times), Werrenrath, Whitehill, Amato, de Gogorza, Middleton.

Pianists, Godowsky, Bloomfield-Zeisler, Ganz,

Goodson, Shattuck, Maier and Pattison, Hutcheson, Levitzki, Reuter, Ney.

Violinists, Macmillan, Elman, Zimbalist, Ray, Morini, Lent.

Among the factors which have combined to perpetuate the Festival, one must take into account the energy of the successive directors of the Conservatory, the loyal support of the local community, and the financial sacrifices of the board of guarantors. One of the most potent factors, however, is not human but natural—the sheer charm of the season and the setting. May is not a trustworthy month from a climatic point of view, and many times concerts have had depleted audiences because of threatening or stormy weather. But when an Iowa May is on its good behavior, there is no more exquisite time in the whole year. What is more, the College Chapel, where these Festivals are held, crowns the highest hill for miles around, is surrounded by lovely sloping lawns, and looks down upon a smiling and prosperous countryside, unsurpassed in Iowa. The spectacle after either matinée or evening concert is a pleasant memory to many visitors.

The influence of such an institution as the Festival is, of course, difficult to measure; but is likely strongest upon children growing up in the community. Years ago one member of the orchestra began staying in a home where was a lad with musical ambitions. As the visits continued, the visitor

began teaching the lad the same instrument he himself played. The families having become fast friends, there was visiting back and forth between Chicago and Mount Vernon. At length, the boy went to Chicago, to be in the musician's home, and continue his studies. To-day he is a promising player in the Chicago Civic Orchestra. While he may never attain fame, that is one way cultural institutions make their mark, and sometimes are rewarded in the development of great geniuses. Equally valuable, however, is the transitory, diffused influence upon the casual hearers. Other agencies have now begun to reinforce it on a large scale, and America is fast becoming, what Germany and Italy have long been, a music-loving country. In this, one of the gentler of the arts, it thus finds a calming influence to balance its merciless and exhausting energy.

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