

HANDBOOKS FOR MUSICIANS

EDITED BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

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*To my Old Friend*

DR. W. G. MCNAUGHT, F.R.A.M.

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# CHORAL TECHNIQUE

AND

# INTERPRETATION

BY

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# PREFACE.

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THIS book has been written to assist Choral Conductors and Choirmasters, though its scope is not limited to these, as many of the principles embodied in the text are applicable to Soloists as well as to Orchestral and Military Conductors.

There is no padding or mere theorizing in the book. Everything written is the outcome of living experience, and has stood the test of many years' trial.

Other methods may be equally good, or better ; but because I have found what is herein stated to be, in my judgment, the most effective, I have, without reserve, placed my plans and experience at the disposal of all who are seeking to develop Choral music and Choral singing, either in the small Choir or in the large Festival Chorus.

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# MODERN CHORAL TECHNIQUE AND INTERPRETATION.

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WHEN journeying round the world during 1911 with the Sheffield World Tour Choir, to realise Dr. Charles Harriss's great imperial idea of musical reciprocity in the British Empire, amongst my pleasantest experiences I count the meetings and friendly discussions with the conductors of the numerous choral societies in Canada, America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. In every case a spirit of enthusiasm for choral singing was manifested, coupled with a keen desire to reach a high standard. Therefore it was only natural that these conversations almost invariably drifted into a series of inquiries as to the management of the voice, the problem of maintaining the pitch, how to secure *pianissimo*, the secret of clear diction, and other topics connected with Choral Technique in its most modern development.

All these points of inquiry, which are also exercising the minds of hundreds of choral conductors in the British Isles, I carefully noted, and I propose in the following pages to give such hints, advice, and instruction that no single problem connected with choral singing, shall, if possible, remain unsolved.

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This may seem a presumptuous remark, but to vindicate the statement I propose to press into service the crystallized essence of forty years' experience as conductor of all sorts and conditions of choirs, which I trust will enable me to justify the assertion.

This extended practical knowledge has been gained from bodies of singers ranging from the raw, rough material of village singers to the polished select choir; from small bodies of twenty-four voices to masses of over fifty thousand.

From the above foreshadowing of the scheme of the book, it will be gathered that its object is intensely practical—in fact, to assist in every possible way the hosts of choral conductors and choir-masters to become effective participators in that tremendous and wonderful forward movement in choral singing, splendid examples of which are now to be heard at many of our Musical Festivals, advanced choral societies' concerts, and choral contests, whether known as Eisteddfodau or Competitive Festivals.

### DEFINITION OF THE NEW TECHNIQUE, AND INTERPRETATIVE AIM.

To the question, What is the New Choral Technique? the answer may be given that it embraces all the splendid qualities, grand, rich tone, broad effects, and thrilling climaxes of the old style of choral singing, as exemplified at the Leeds and Birmingham Musical Festivals of the 'eighties and 'nineties, plus the more refined expression and greater dramatic import demanded by the more advanced and much more critical audiences of to-day.

These added attributes of progressive choral training may be briefly summarized as follows:—

(a) Greater vocal control on the part of the singers. This must be shown in homogeneity of tone, so that each vocal part, however numerous, sounds like one huge voice and not like a congeries of conflicting voices.

Further, the voices must be able to produce different qualities of tone. No longer will one tone-quality satisfy the claims of interpretation of even such works as *The Messiah* and *Elijah*, whilst in modern choral works variety of tone-quality is absolutely necessary. Therefore numerous tone tints—the white, the impersonal, the ethereal, the dull and the dark, the breathy, and many other colourings—must be available.

There must be also characterization of tone to exemplify the sob, the exclamation, the snarl, the laugh—playful, mocking, derisive, or fiendish—the shout of triumph, &c. In fact, the whole gamut of dramatic emotion has now to be portrayed by the subtle shadings of the tone-quality of the voices.

(b) Expression of a more refined and artistic character must be shown.

In addition to the sudden contrasts from *pp* to *ff* and *vice versa*—dearly beloved of old—the fine *cres.* and *dim.*, the melting and merging of one phrase into another, the definite prominence or subordination of any part or parts, as in artistic string quartets, and the due attention to contrasts of force, all need incorporation in the modern scheme of expression.

(c) Words and their articulation call for supreme attention. The new technique predicates greater care in securing correct vowel quantity and clear

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definition of consonants, whether they be initial, middle, or final.

In addition to this technical perfection, vitalising of the words and sentences by proper tone and emphasis is demanded, so that the dramatic sense is never in doubt, the result being the attainment of good diction—that pearl of great price.

(d) In phrasing, it exacts careful marking of the breathing places so as to secure a natural grouping of the words. Further, the musical phrasing, when not controlled by the text, is not left to haphazard treatment, as has been too often the case.

(e) Rhythm is exalted to a high position. Means are adopted to secure such a control of accents and stresses—regular and irregular—that each distinctive phrase maintains its individuality while not interfering with the other parts, thus avoiding the muddiness and jumble which one often hears, say, in Bach's music when badly rendered.

The sense of the composition must be faithfully reflected in the performance. It will not suffice to sing "He trusted in God" in the same manner as "Glory to God"; or the "Wraith of Odin" (*King Olaf*) with the same atmosphere as the succeeding chorus, "A little bird in the air"; or a madrigal in part-song fashion. A recognition of diversity of styles of composition and adaptation of means to end is now exacted.

(f) Breathing must be dealt with systematically, not only to secure power to phrase, but to get control of breath pressure, so as to produce those extraordinary *fortissimo* effects which suggest illimitable power of voice.

The new training also demands a wider outlook and a greater range of composition than

existed in the past. It will not do to confine the performances to a few well-known works, or even a wider range of old works, to the exclusion of modern compositions. Up to a few years ago there was a strong disposition on the part of both conductors and societies to treat with scant courtesy any work which presented anything out of the current idiom, and which was therefore rather difficult to perform. I am of opinion that the many failures in the rendering of works at our leading Musical Festivals have been due to the inertia of the performers rather than to the demerits of the compositions. The way difficulties were shirked used to make my blood boil, because many new, strange effects were never realised, and the works were consequently damned. A conspicuous example of putting new wine into old bottles was the first performance of *Gerontius*. We can now look back and smile at the fiasco, because we properly attribute the failure to the fact that the new spirit of progress—so well vindicated since at the same festival—had not entered into either the officials or the singers. This spirit of tackling and mastering difficulties for an artistic purpose must be paramount in all who wish to march under the banner of the newest choralism.

The foregoing demands of modern choral singing may seem appalling to many, but experience has shown that they can all be met. When, from 1875 to 1895, I attended all the chief festivals as musical critic, the limitations of the old style of choralism were often very evident to me. Though there were very many things to praise—and I never had occasion to write an adverse criticism of the

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choral singing—the lack of delicacy, the absence of clearness in the words, the few attempts (generally failures) at characterization, the lack of spring and alertness, &c., produced such a feeling of dissatisfaction in me that I had often to lecture myself in some such manner as the following: “You are unreasonable to expect a large body of singers to be as smart and agile as a small select choir or the principals. Is it fair to expect four hundred voices to give a real *pianissimo*; or to demand perfection in chromatic chords; or to exact individuality in involved polyphony? You might as well expect an omnibus to go noiselessly along the road, or railway engines to skip like rams, or an elephant to say ‘See me dance the polka.’ In the nature of things it is impossible. Be reasonable. Praise the things that are worthy of praise, and leave the irremediable faults alone.”

Happily I had a choral society—the Sheffield Musical Union—which enabled me by frequent experiment to put to practical test whether it was possible for a large choir to equal a smaller body in the matters of responsiveness, alertness, quality of tone, expression, and diction. The ever-faithful singers enthusiastically pursued the ideal of their leader, and fearlessly trod strange paths, traversed many unknown vocal regions, and scaled choral heights which had hitherto not been attempted. The success and the great local reputation of the Sheffield Musical Union chorus led to the choir of the first Sheffield Festival being placed under my sole control.

It is not presumption to say that the singing of these three hundred and twenty voices was a genuine revelation to the visiting critics, and



proved that all the attributes of artistic singing—good vocal tone, power without roughness, delicate nuances without weakness, true intonation, perfect chording and blend, clearness of attack, clearness of words together with perfection of mobility and discipline—could be attained as well by a large body of vocalists as by a small select choir.

The possibilities of higher achievements being shown, the path thus opened out has been successfully followed by highly talented and enthusiastic conductors, with the result that we hear to-day at most Musical Festivals, Eisteddfodau, and other competitive meetings, performances of compositions which, in respect of their difficulty and the excellence of their rendering, would have been thought impossible a dozen years ago.

Herein lies the reason for the writing of this book. It is to set forth the *underlying* principles of artistic choral attainment, so that the ordinary well-informed enthusiastic choral conductor may approximate in result to the excellent renderings of the select souls to whose conducting reference has been made above, and thus raise the artistic standard of singing throughout the world.

## THE REHEARSAL.

The choral society exists, or should exist, primarily for the realisation of an ideal, the flower and fruit of this being a performance, as perfect as possible, of the work undertaken.

In this ideal there should be faultless technique and artistic expression—the former to give intellectual satisfaction, the latter to stir the emotions,—the whole to transport the hearer to that exaltation of spirit, free from baser passions, which it is the glory of music to produce.

While this end should always be kept in mind, we must never lose sight of the means to the end. Hence the importance of giving attention to the supreme factor in musical achievement — *the rehearsal*.

There is a hoary fiction that a final bad rehearsal ensures a good performance. It may be granted that a poor final effort may have its value by making the performers careful at the concert, but it is a mistake to think that a poor or bad rehearsal is anything but a calamity to a society of amateurs. Artistic ideality soon droops in the chilly atmosphere of incompetent dulness; shrivels up in the air of strenuous misdirection of effort; withers and expires in the sultry blasts of querulous irritability.

Therefore the subject *How to conduct rehearsals* is of vital importance to the artistic, and incidentally to the commercial success of the choral society.

In the main there are three methods of taking rehearsals. These I name:—

- 1st. The Conventional Generalizing ;
- 2nd. The Critical (or hypercritical)—  
Particularizing ; and
- 3rd. The Compartmental Specializing.

These methods may be used at both full and sectional rehearsals.

Generally all three varieties are used consciously or unconsciously by all conductors, but as "Method is the secret of success," if conductors are able to realise the distinctive features and differences of the three plans of conducting rehearsals, and also know the best stage at which to use each style—whether singly or in combination—rehearsals will be made much more effective and enjoyable. The enjoyment aspect is to my mind of such importance that it swallows up every other consideration, for pleasurable choral rehearsals mean profitable social reunions.

I will now consider this trinity of plans, with a view of obtaining unity of effects, namely, getting as much good work done as possible in the limited time for rehearsal.

#### THE CONVENTIONAL GENERALIZING METHOD.

The Conventional Generalizing Method is the one to be followed chiefly as the foundation of all rehearsals. It consists of going through the music time after time until the general outline of it is

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mastered, and the spirit of the composition fully grasped by the singers. Theoretically this is quite correct, and, as such, this useful and necessary process is followed by the great majority of conductors. Most of them, however, fail to achieve success, or at least distinction, because of the limitations of the method. It needs that element of ideality which the Particularizing and Specializing Methods presuppose. At a recent Three Choirs Festival an enthusiastic gentleman amateur asked a very well-known composer—who is generally regarded as a great genius in composition—What is genius? He replied, "Two per cent. of inspiration, and ninety-eight per cent. of perspiration." In artistic matters, as in the Sheffield high-grade steel, it is the two per cent. of inspiration which makes all the difference between the ordinary and the really good. Those who follow the Generalizing Method exclusively, just miss this two per cent.—the "vital spark"—and the oft-heard remark of conductors, "That will do," when really the fine edge of polish and attainment has never been attempted or even thought of, shows that thousands of choirmasters regard this conventional treatment as a terminus, not merely a thoroughfare which has to be traversed in the search for artistic perfection.

### THE CRITICAL PARTICULARIZING METHOD.

The Particularizing Method consists in striving for perfection in each detail—music, words, expression, &c.—to attain which the method is absolutely necessary. Strangely enough this method, as carried out by some conductors, produces disastrous

results—by exciting irritation instead of giving irradiation or illumination, and thus killing all pleasure in the rehearsals.

Let us follow, in a matter-of-fact way, the common usage of a conductor who adopts this method.

Full of zeal, with a lofty ideal, and familiar with the score, he begins the rehearsal with high hopes and a firm determination to achieve something good. In the first few bars he hears some wrong notes. Instead of allowing these to pass and "blundering through" somehow, he stops the choir to try over, say, the bass and contralto parts separately. He starts again, and finds the sopranos and tenors are wrong, therefore he stops again to put them right. If he let that suffice all would be well, because choirs rather like short explanatory stoppages; but presently he stops because a phrase has been sung *forte* instead of *piano*, and says, with a growl, that it is surprising that they should not observe expression marks, &c. A harsh voice and a mispronounced word call for stoppage and reproof; and by the end of the rehearsal one chorus, perhaps, has been got through. The choir meanwhile are invariably annoyed and "fretted" at being stopped so often—like a spirited horse that is being constantly "pulled" by a tactless driver—and sore at having to sit, for a seemingly long part of the evening, listening to the other "parts" correcting their mistakes. The feeling running through it all is "much cry and little wool." This kind of thing is repeated at subsequent rehearsals, because of the avowed determination of the conductor to "make everything perfect as we go along," with the result that at the

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concert the last chorus, or perhaps two choruses, have to be sung practically at sight; and as the earlier choruses are not sung too well through not being heard frequently as a whole, the final impression on the mind of the audience is one of disappointment.

This is not a fancy picture, as I know societies which have undergone this treatment from well-meaning, clever men for season after season, until a rebellion of the long-suffering members has led to a change of conductors.

The mistake is to expect artistic results too soon. They forget the old saw "Rome was not built in a day." Singers as a rule are aware of mistakes, and when they have got a kind of subconscious grasp of harmonies they master the errors privately. In this matter of note-perfection, after pointing out errors or very difficult phrases, it is good policy to leave it to the members and "wait and see." This is better than doing as some conductors do, viz., keep three-quarters of the society doing nothing for half the night while one of the parts is mastering a knotty point.

Equally wasteful and unsatisfactory is it to try to get a body of players or singers to render a phrase with expression before the phrase itself and the words have become familiar, or rather burnt into the mind. Every artistic effect must have its antecedent of preparatory work. Taking it as a whole, long experience of myself and others has shown me that more harm is done by the too early application of the Particularizing hypercritical wanting-to-do-too-many-things-at-a-time Method, than by the apparently slower—even stodgy—conventional "non-stop" manner, where at least

the choir does get a full night's singing and thereby makes some progress, whereas the "fretting" system irritates the singers.

#### THE COMPARTMENTAL SPECIALIZING METHOD.

The little known and little practised Compartmental Specializing Method consists in taking some special point or topic, and concentrating all attention on it, and, for the time being, ignoring everything else. For instance, if note-perfection of a difficult phrase be the object sought, all faults of tone-quality, words, breathing, or expression are passed over. The same rule is observed if the topic of study be the development of a fugal subject, or obtaining fluency in runs, divisions, or roulades, as in "His yoke is easy," or "For unto us."

Amongst the many features that call for specialization we may include the working up to a climax; the polishing of a *pianissimo* phrase; the obtaining of perfect attack; the management of the *crescendo* and the *diminuendo*; the realising of the dynamic and emotional *sforzandos* and pressure notes; the clarifying—to the listener—of close imitations; the development of marked entries; the perfecting of vowels and consonants; the marking of breathing places; the unifying of tone-quality; and the developing of characteristic tonal effects, as in the "Demons' Chorus," "He trusted in God," the "Amen" in *Faust*, &c.

The above list is not exhaustive, as each composition presents its own problems. This specializing method may be described as the Napoleonic "Divide and Conquer" policy: or perhaps it more nearly follows the plan of

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Mr. Maskelyne and other famous jugglers and plate-spinners, who get one plate spinning before they attempt to set going the next.


Of course care must be taken not to give too large doses of this method at one time, or it would become as wearisome as the Particularizing Method. Fortunately experience has shown that it takes only a seemingly short time to enforce one or two points during an evening, because when the object aimed at is explained to the singers they generally enter into the spirit of the quest, and when they become interested the time is pleasurable and profitably spent.

### THE UNION OF THE THREE METHODS.

It will be seen from the above that by no one of the three methods alone can the highest results be achieved, and as the success of the rehearsals depends upon the conductor's mental grasp of the three methods, and his power to blend the trinity into a unity, it is necessary to consider how and when to use the methods singly and in combination.

First in order comes the General Conventional Method. This should be used almost exclusively for the first two or three rehearsals, and, combined with the other methods, should continue to the final rehearsal. When the music and words have been roughly but firmly outlined, and the "hang" of the piece fairly grasped, then Specializing or Particularizing treatment should supplement the general coaching.

The specializing should be introduced at the very earliest moment, but in the early stages should be applied in homœopathic doses. It is the





opportunist's method. It gives the smart conductor the chance of putting right a particularly knotty point, and, while relieving for five minutes the decorous general method, it also gives the conductor credit for alertness.

For instance, a good method of specializing is to take one or two difficult intervals or phrases in a piece, and, before the music is sung over, to pattern the phrase by voice or pianoforte, showing how it should be sung. By this means pitfalls are made comparatively easy to circumvent, and much time is saved. As examples of the kind of phrase here meant, I would refer to bar 11 of Elgar's "Go, song of mine," where the sudden transition from B minor to E flat minor is very disconcerting unless the mind of the singer has been prepared for it. Similarly the sopranos must be prepared for the high G natural, bar 14, in F minor, which comes abruptly after G flat in the bass and contralto parts in bar 13. It will not be necessary to multiply examples to which this principle can be applied, because almost every modern piece contains one or more phrases in which it is necessary. This specializing should not be undertaken without previous preparation on the part of the conductor. He should know what he wants and how to go about getting it.

During the early general rehearsals he should notice any errors of notes, time, rhythm, attack, release, phrasing and what not, marking in blue pencil the places that want special attention. He is then able to form his plan of operations, and having decided upon his special subject for the next rehearsal, he should not be diverted from the one point by the appearance of other errors, but